

MIKE SHAYNE

The logo for Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine. The title "MIKE SHAYNE" is in large, bold, orange letters. "MIKE" is on top and "SHAYNE" is on the bottom. Below the title, the words "MYSTERY MAGAZINE" are in a smaller, bold, yellow font. In the top right corner, there is a small illustration of a man in a suit and hat, walking towards the right. Above the illustration, the word "JUN" is written in yellow. The background is black.

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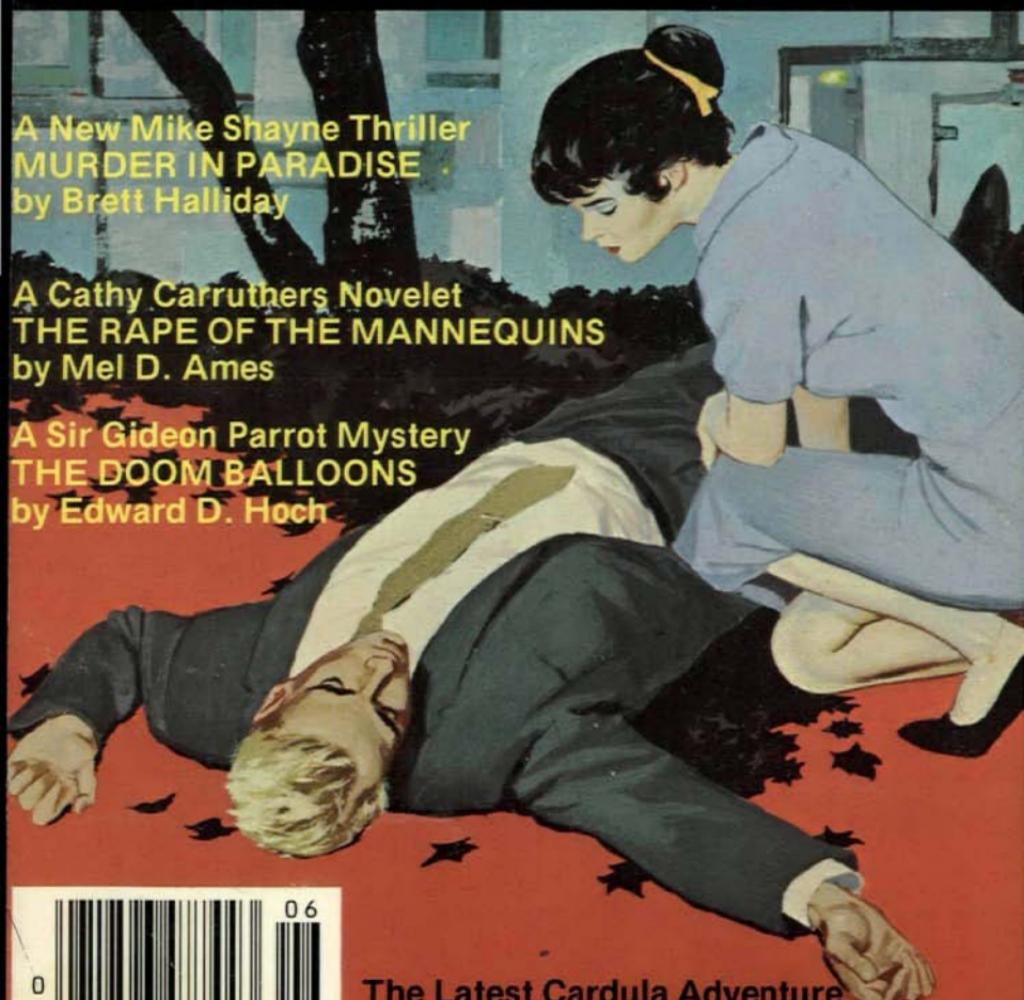
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**A New Mike Shayne Thriller
MURDER IN PARADISE .
by Brett Halliday**

**A Cathy Carruthers Novelet
THE RAPE OF THE MANNEQUINS
by Mel D. Ames**

A Sir Gideon Parrot Mystery
THE DOOM BALLOONS
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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MURDER IN PARADISE

by Brett Halliday

Like any Garden of Eden it had its share of poisonous snakes. The trail of his friend's killer led Mike Shayne to Hawaii, where the climate suddenly turned deadly!..... 4

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Hawaii can be a paradise or it can be hell. Investigating the murder of a friend, Mike Shayne found a little of one and too much of the other!

Murder In Paradise

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE HAD NEVER REALLY FORGOTTEN HER.

As he read the cablegram in his private office, Shayne's rugged face was calm, masking the memories that churned beneath it. Five years! Could it really have been that long since he'd seen Valerie? The redhead tossed the yellow piece of paper onto his desk, lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply.

The cable was from Rudy Tatupu, one of Shayne's counterparts in Honolulu, and it was grimly terse: ROGER HANSON MURDERED HERE LAST WEEKEND. VALERIE O.K. NO LEADS. BURIAL IS THURSDAY P.M. CAN YOU COME? He glanced at his desk calendar; today was Wednesday.

Shayne grimaced and blew a plume of smoke. Roger Hanson had been an up-and-coming young corporate lawyer here in Miami seven years ago when the detective had first known him. There had been a

problem involving the theft of some valuable blueprints from his office safe and Shayne had taken the case. During the investigation he had met Valerie King, Hanson's legal secretary, a stunning, green-eyed brunette who had been Miss Dade County the previous year. There had been sparks between them immediately, even though Shayne sensed there was also something going on with Valerie and her employer. The two men had engaged in a friendly but determined rivalry over her for several months.

The case itself had finally been blown wide open in a dramatic confrontation with Hanson's former law partner. Some shots were fired and his client ended up in the thick of it, saving Shayne from taking a bullet by risking his own life. It was a debt the detective acknowledged with a touch of irony. How could you try to take a girl from the man who'd just saved your life? Shayne backed off.

A short time later Valerie had announced that Roger was moving to Hawaii to open a new practice, and that she was going along, as his wife. She had made her decision — no hard feelings? Shayne smiled and wished them well, even attended the wedding and drank more cognac than he should have. But something strong remained between Valerie and him, bothersome to the redhead because he was not a man who lived in the past.

He had visited them once, five years ago, while in the islands on business, but it was an uncomfortable experience. Old suitors, and all that. He had left quickly. Now Roger Hanson had been murdered — and the debt was still unpaid.

SHAYNE STEPPED INTO THE OUTER OFFICE, WHERE LUCY Hamilton was playing the keyboard of her electric typewriter at a furious pace. She stopped and gave him a worried smile, sensing that something was wrong.

“Angel, get me reservations to Honolulu on the earliest flight available. We'll put the Melville case on the back burner and recommend another agency for Barker's skip-trace. I think the bank account can stand it. I should be back in a few days. Okay?”

Lucy stood up, brushing back a lock of brown hair. “Michael, what's happened? Why Honolulu?”

“That wire was from Rudy Tatupu; you've heard me mention him. An old friend of mine, Roger Hanson, has been murdered. He took a big chance once when I was looking down the barrel of a .45. I owe him something.”

Lucy frowned. "Roger Hanson. Isn't that the fellow who married Valerie what's-her-name? Oh." Her tone cooled. "Are you sure this trip is for his sake? You two were pretty thick once."

"So we were, Angel, so we were. That was a long time ago. But Roger was a fine young man, a successful young man." Shayne's voice was hard with anger. "I'm sick of seeing all the good people wasted. Maybe I can do something to help catch his killer."

"Or comfort his widow," Lucy said softly. "Alright, I'm sorry. I'm being catty. What should I do with our tickets for the Dolphins-Jets game this weekend?"

"Call Tim Rourke. He'll take them off our hands. And you'd better send a cable to Rudy later, letting him know when I'll be there. Anything else?"

"Michael. Bring me back a Tiki?"

Shayne raised an eyebrow. "Hmmm?"

"A Tiki. One of those carved wooden statues of the Hawaiian gods. I've always wanted one."

"You've got it, Angel." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Now I'd better get started on cleaning up the paperwork. Let me know as soon as you find out about the reservations, okay?"

"Be careful," Lucy whispered, so low that Shayne didn't hear her as he returned to the inner office.

SHAYNE FLEW DELTA TO ATLANTA AND ON INTO CHICAGO the next morning, where he connected with United's 747 direct to Hawaii. The flight took eight hours, but with the time difference he arrived at Honolulu International before two o'clock in the afternoon, local time. Rudy Tatupu was waiting for him at the gate, smiling broadly.

"Aloha, Mike," he said warmly, pumping Shayne's hand. "Sorry the circumstances couldn't have been more pleasant."

Rudy was a full-blooded Samoan, big as an offensive tackle, which he had been many years ago at the University of Hawaii, good-humored, tough, and a tenacious private investigator. Shayne had worked with him before and respected him. He wore a painfully bright aloha shirt outside cream-colored pants. His bronze face was seamed with laugh wrinkles and his curly black hair was thick as a rug.

Shayne grinned. "Good to see you, Rudy." He glanced around at the throngs of people milling about the airport, local and tourist alike in colorful island dress. Pretty native girls welcomed arriving visitors

with flower leis in the age-old tradition. "This place gets more crowded every time I see it. Did you manage a room?"

"Good news, brother. The Royal Hawaiian had a cancellation. I got you in for three nights at least."

"Great." The Royal Hawaiian was Shayne's favorite Waikiki hotel, its handsome Moorish architecture now almost buried amidst the hundreds of glass and stainless steel high-rises along the beach. To him it represented the old Oahu, a real paradise before commercialization and overdevelopment had turned Honolulu into an urban jungle, much like Miami. The two cities had a lot in common.

After a twenty minute wait they collected Shayne's lone bag, tossed it into the back of Rudy's battered '74 Cadillac, and dueled a steady stream of taxis and tour buses to get out onto the Nimitz Highway. As they rode downtown Shayne caught up on the local gossip, looked at proudly displayed pictures of Rudy's family — now increased to seven — and heard the grim details of Roger Hanson's death.

"Mike, it was a bad scene. Two days in the ocean, being battered against the lava rocks and worked over by the fishes and crabs. Ugly. I was down at the city morgue on other business and I saw what came out of the body bag — it cost me my lunch." Noticing Shayne's expression the big Samoan subsided. "Anyway, I'd done some work for Hanson and I knew you two guys were old acquaintances so I got in touch with you. Roger Hanson was a big man here in the islands, a very popular fellow. The business community's in an uproar."

"Still no leads?"

"Not according to HPD. His money, watch, and a diamond ring were gone so it could have been robbery."

"How was he killed?"

"Well, his wife reported him missing late Friday evening. He never came home from the office and they were supposed to attend some kind of fund raising benefit at the Yacht Club. The rescue squad pulled his body out of Hanauma Bay Sunday afternoon. Cause of death: four slugs from a heavy caliber handgun. So heavy none of the bullets stayed in the body to give the forensics boys any fun and games."

"Ummm. Heavy artillery for a holdup man." Shayne scraped a thumbnail across his chin. "Your wire said the funeral was today?"

"Yeah. In fact the graveside services should be going on right about now, up at Punchbowl. Want me to swing over there?"

"Let's take a look," Shayne said.

THE BURIAL WAS AT PUNCHBOWL NATIONAL CEMETERY, inside a long extinct volcanic crater overlooking the city. Its rim presented a panoramic view of the windward side of the island, from Pearl Harbor to Diamond Head. Shayne and Rudy stood at the back of the crowd of fifty or so mourners surrounding the open grave.

The tradewinds, fragrant with flowering plumeria, whispered across the marker-dotted bowl. An old Hawaiian lady with a ukulele sang "Aloha-oe" as they lowered the casket into the ground. It looked to Shayne like a lot of prominent folks were in attendance. He wondered what thoughts were passing through all those heads bowed in such prayerful attitudes.

The service was over quickly. Shayne glanced across the gravesite at the widow — and found her staring back at him, green eyes wide with surprise. Five years hadn't changed her much. Long chestnut hair streamed in the breeze as Valerie removed the black hat and veil and came slowly over to where he stood. She looked fine, he thought, still slim, elegant and vibrant. As she came closer Shayne saw that some of the softness had gone out of her eyes and face. Her hands twisted nervously.

"Mike! What a surprise! It was good of you to come." She leaned against him and Shayne held her loosely, recalling the touch of her body, the smell of her hair. There were more than a few raised eyebrows among Honolulu's upper crust at the sight of the big redhead in the rumpled suit. He murmured something sympathetic.

Valerie's eyes found Rudy. "Of course. You contacted him?"

The Samoan shuffled his feet. "Yes, ma'am. I knew he'd want to be here. Maybe he can help."

"Thank you." She stepped back from Shayne and smiled wanly. "The police still seem to be going in circles over Roger's murder." She seemed to make a decision. "But there's something else — Mike, can you come by this evening? Around eight? This will all be over by then. I do need to talk to you."

"Sure." Shayne gave her his arm and they walked to the line of parked cars. People stopped them several times to offer condolences and, Shayne guessed, to look him over.

As he was handing Valerie into a black Lincoln, a stocky local man in a sharply pressed gray suit wandered over. "Lieutenant Russ Kalami, HPD homicide. Welcome to Honolulu, Mr. Shayne. Hello, Rudy."

"Lieutenant. I hardly expected a welcoming committee."

"It's my job to know who comes and goes. We're happy to have you in the islands, Shayne — as a visitor. No need to remind you that you don't have a license to operate here?" His tone was pleasant but his eyes were hard.

"No need at all, Lieutenant." Shayne fired back a few non-verbals of his own. "How's the investigation coming?"

"We're making steady progress," Kalami said without inflection. "Enjoy your stay. I'm sure Rudy here can show you all the sights."

"He's not real fond of our profession," Rudy said as the policeman walked away. "And he's been taking a lot of heat over this killing."

Shayne shrugged. He didn't care much for cops who threw their authority around, marking their territory like a pit bull. No matter how good they were, there were still some things a private detective could do that they couldn't.

They beat the slow-moving procession out of the crater and drove down through the city to Waikiki, where Shayne checked into the Royal Hawaiian. Rudy said he had some work to do on a missing University of Hawaii student case, but that he would stop by in the morning.

At Shayne's request, one of the maids dug up a few copies of the *Star-Bulletin* from the past week. He read all the items on the Hanson murder. There wasn't much hard information. Popular speculation seemed to run along two lines: either the lawyer had simply been the victim of a violent robbery or else he had run afoul of the Mob, a brutally powerful force in the islands. The stories all confirmed that he was well regarded, an influential community figure.

After he had finished, Shayne changed into trunks and spent half an hour in the light surf in front of the hotel, clearing the pressurization cobwebs of prolonged flying from his brain. Back in the room he showered, shaved, and stretched out on the bed, setting his mental alarm for an hour's nap.

Shayne awoke at six-thirty, dressed, and grabbed a bite to eat in the dining room. At the desk he rented a small, year-old Buick. It was a twenty minute drive to the Hansons' Kahala home — estate, rather, beyond Diamond Head in the richest part of the city. He found it without too much difficulty, relying on the memory of his previous visit.

As he drove, Shayne felt a familiar tightness in the diaphragm that usually meant trouble wasn't too far away. He smiled bleakly. It was an old instinct and it seldom failed him.

II

SHAYNE PARKED IN THE BIG CIRCULAR DRIVE OF THE enormous one-level house and rang the bell beside ornate teakwood double doors. A young Hawaiian girl answered it, seemed to giggle behind her hand, and let him in.

The place wasn't too grand, Shayne decided; it was just that, living in an apartment, he wasn't used to chandeliers and solariums. The girl led him through half a dozen expensively decorated rooms to an enclosed poolside lanai and left him alone with the orchids and miniature palms, promising that her mistress would be along in a few minutes.

The detective lit a cigarette and mused some more about Roger Hanson, deceased. He'd apparently had it all: a beautiful wife, a fine home, a thriving law practice, the respect of his community, a few nibbles at local political offices. The Lord giveth, and some homicidal bastard taketh away. Shayne wondered who had wasted him and why. No doubt he had made his share of enemies on the way up; all successful men do.

"Hello, Mike." Valerie came out, wearing a red and black kimono, carrying something tall and cool in each hand. She sat down at the wrought-iron table with him. She looked lovely, even though her mascara was smudged and there was a tremor in her hands as she put down the drinks. Shayne tasted him. It was a very good planter's punch.

"How're you feeling, Val?"

"Better. Thank God it's over," she sighed, downing half her drink and lighting a cigarette. "Funerals are so barbaric, don't you think?"

"They're big business," Shayne said absently. "Val, I'm sorry about Roger. We had our differences back in Miami, mostly over you, but —"

She held up a hand. "You know, I was just thinking about those days. There were some good times, but I could never choose between you two. Roger was steady, reliable, a chance for security and the good life. With you it was like being carried off into the desert over a saddle bow; I never knew where we were going or when you might throw me off."

Shayne grinned. "I remember. Well, you made the right choice. Roger was a good man, a strong one. He saved my neck back then . . . Any idea what might have happened?"

She shook her head. "Everything was going so well. It just seems like one of those senseless things."

"This afternoon you said there was something else bothering you?"

Valerie's mouth turned down. "Yes. It came up after Roger's death. Maybe you can straighten it out. There's a client of Roger's named Justin, Gil Justin. He's one of the bigger developers in the islands. People give him some of the dubious credit for turning Waikiki into a high-rise jungle. Right now he's working on a new condominium project up in the Manoa Valley. Well, I had a call from him yesterday. He asked me — and he really sounded hot — if I knew about some tapes Roger had. I said no. Then he told me to look through Roger's private things. If I found them we had to get together and talk about turning them over to him. He said they could do a lot of harm if they fell into the wrong hands."

"Did you find them?"

"Yes. In Roger's safe. I want you to listen to them."

She went inside and came back with a little tape recorder and two cassettes. They were labeled "Justin — Manoa Condos." Shayne listened to them over a second planter's punch.

He could understand why Gil Justin was upset. The tapes had obviously come from a phone tap. The various conversations made it clear that the developer had made payoffs to a certain city zoning official to speed up clearance for the project.

"Was Roger blackmailing him?" Valerie asked in a troubled voice when the last tape had ended.

"It's hard to say." Shayne knew what she was really asking — had this kind of activity gotten him killed? "Did you find anything else?"

"No. Mike, why would he do something like this? God knows we didn't need the money."

"Maybe he planned to use them for leverage on somebody. I take it you want to keep the law out of this?"

She nodded. "For now, yes. I don't want Roger's name dragged through the mud until I find out what's been going on. Maybe it wasn't blackmail at all. Will you help me?"

"It'll be a little touchy since I can't legally operate over here. But Rudy can run interference for me. Tell you what: Let me have those tapes. Call Justin and set up a meeting with him tomorrow. I'll go along."

"Thank you," Valerie said softly. She swept her hand around, indicating the lavish surroundings. "I can pay you well."

Shayne laughed. "No charge," he said lightly. "For old time's sake."

"EARLY TO BED AND EARLY TO RISE, MAKES A MAN FIRST IN line for an Egg McMuffin!" Rudy stood outside Shayne's hotel room door, a plastic-wrapped breakfast in each hand.

The redhead groaned and slipped the chain. It was eight o'clock but he didn't feel particularly rested, maybe because of jet-lag from the trip. The big Samoan bounced into the room, unbearably cheerful.

As they ate, Shayne related his visit with Valerie the previous evening. By the time he had finished Rudy was nodding his head impatiently.

"You think this is somehow connected with Hanson's killing?"

"Maybe." Shayne rubbed his eyes. "But I can't see Justin doing anything when he didn't have his hands on those tapes. Too much chance of his being exposed. I'm going to see him today."

Rudy grunted. "Be careful. Gil Justin's a tough customer, a local hood who bought himself some respectability in the development business. He's been in jail at least twice. The first time, a six month sentence trimmed to ninety days, came after he cut so many corners on materials that one of his buildings collapsed, mashing three workers. The second was an eighteen month stretch for strangling a union organizer with his bare hands during a wild brawl in a Kalihi nightclub. He's collected a bunch of other charges, from drunk driving to conspiracy to commit murder, but they never came to trial. He's what my granny would have called an unsavory character."

Shayne nodded. "I'll watch him. I want you to take these tapes and see if you can identify the guy Justin's dealing with. They never use a name, but it shouldn't be too difficult. I'll get back to you later today."

"On my way," Rudy said. "Keep your back against something solid."

Valerie called a few minutes later. She had agreed to meet with Gil Justin at ten o'clock up at the Manoa development site. She picked Shayne up at a quarter to in a silver-gray 450SL that probably went for more than he made in a year. They shot up the H-1 freeway and off the Manoa exit in a flurry of gear-shifting and lane-changing. Valerie wore a simple white linen jumpsuit. Her dark rich hair was tied back with a bright green scarf. Shayne reminded himself that she was less than a week widowed.

THE SUN WAS STRIKING A FIERY HALO OFF THE CLOUDS OF mist ringing the Nuuanu Pali when they reached the site. Two huge bulldozers had carved a dozen acres out of the rain forest and were in the process of leveling a notch in the steep mountainside. The thud of pile drivers made a deafening racket. Valerie parked in front of a long construction trailer, between a dirty white Corvette and a dump truck.

A man who had to be Gil Justin came out of the trailer, smiled as he saw Valerie, scowled when he saw Shayne was with her. He was a short, extremely broad man in his mid-fifties, with close-cropped gray hair and leathery brown skin. He reminded Shayne of hardcase dock-workers the detective had encountered in Miami's seedier waterfront environs.

He apparently possessed the same social graces too. "Mrs. Hanson, I told you to keep this matter private between us. Who is this clown?"

"Mr. Shayne is an old friend," Valerie said. "He came to advise me."

Justin sneered. "Thrilled to meet you. Now get lost."

Anger boiled inside Shayne. Chemistry or whatever, it was hate at first sight. He stuck out a battlescarred hand. Justin looked at it, started to ignore it, then decided to grab it and see how much damage he could do.

When he clamped down to crush the knobby knuckles, Shayne let his grip go limp, stepped into him, got a handful of nose and twisted until Justin howled. He clawed frantically at Shayne's arm, struggling to get free. The redhead blocked off his other arm with a shoulder, spun him around, and ran him into the side of the metal trailer. Justin sat down hard, bleeding from a cut forehead, holding his nose.

"Now that we've got the introductions out of the way," Shayne said, hauling him to his feet, "let's go inside and talk."

Valerie hitched up her sagging chin and they followed a wobbly Justin into the trailer. It was a clutter of blueprints, model layouts, and stacks of invoices.

"You sonofabitch," Justin mumbled as he ran cold water onto a towel and covered his face.

"Don't be abusive," Shayne said mildly. "You called Mrs. Hanson about some tapes. I've heard them. I think you've got trouble."

He turned to stare at them. A healthy gooseegg was rising on his forehead. "Okay, okay. Maybe I cut a few corners getting this job off

the ground. I've made some bad investments lately and lost a couple of bids. Any kind of delay would've sent me down the bankruptcy tube. So say I greased a few palms on the zoning committee to make sure everything flowed. I wouldn't be the first."

"But somehow Roger found out and had your phone tapped," Valerie said. "Why? Was he blackmailing you?"

"What else?" He dabbed at his head. "Ah, not the way you'd think. He didn't want money. Political favors, that's what your husband was looking for. I've been in this racket long enough to have a few connections. I guess he'd have been a state senator before too long."

"Did you kill him?" Shayne asked sharply.

"What am I, stupid? I wanted this stuff kept quiet. For all I knew, he could have made arrangements for the tapes to hit the papers if he was knocked off."

That was more or less what the detective had concluded earlier. "It's a good thing for you he didn't. Was he putting the squeeze on the guy you paid off on the zoning committee — what's his name?"

Justin grimaced. "Funny. It escapes me. I don't know if Hanson was gouging him. Maybe. It'd be a big help to have a man inside city hall if you had political ideas."

Valerie said, "What were you going to offer me for the tapes?"

"Lady, I haven't got a pot. My finances are still rock bottom. Let's say five grand and your husband's good name, 'cause if it comes out now that I made some payoffs I'll damn sure tell the world who was blackmailing me."

"How about a percentage of your return on this deal?" Shayne asked.

"You're fishing, mister. Look, I know how these probate deals go. Mrs. Hanson here can use a little walking around money till they get the estate untangled. That's my offer. Take it or get your cans off my property."

Shayne didn't like it. The developer was too smug. For someone who supposedly needed the tapes for his own security, he was acting as though he held all the cards.

"We'll let you know," he said finally. "Let's go, Val."

"Don't wait too long. I don't like to be left hanging." Justin rubbed his swollen forehead and glared at Shayne. "You'll be hearing from me, hotshot."

Shayne gave him a nasty grin. Again he had the nagging feeling that roles were being reversed: the blackmailee was becoming the black-

mailer. Outside, they stopped for a minute and watched the bulldozers gouging out tons of rich volcanic dirt.

Valerie shook her head violently, as though chasing away unwanted thoughts. "I don't know. This is just too much: first Roger's death and now finding out he may have been involved in some sordid blackmail scheme!"

Shayne took her arm and led her to the car. "That's only Justin's version. It could be that Roger planned to turn him in and was holding the tapes as evidence of the bribery."

Valerie turned to him. "That's true. Thank you, Mike."

"We'll just hang onto those tapes for a while until I can learn a little more about Justin's operation."

As they started back down the road they met a band of scruffy-looking kids heading up. They all wore tee-shirts with the logo "Children of the Earth" and carried hand-painted placards: SAVE THE LAND. NO MORE CONDOS. STOP EXPLOITING US. They waved as the car passed.

"It must be wonderful to be so young and so sure of yourself and your ideals." Valerie sighed. "Where to now?"

"Drop me back at the hotel," Shayne told her. "I need to get hold of Rudy and see if he's learned who the other party was in those phone conversations. Why don't you go on home and try to relax. I'll let you know if anything important turns up."

"I GOT HIM, BROTHER," RUDY SAID HAPPILY. "I GOT HIM!"

"Good deal," Shayne said. "How did you manage it?"

They were at Rudy's King Street office, a dozen blocks from the capitol building in the older part of town. He had the second floor above a karate dojo and there was the continuous muffled thump of falling bodies below as they talked.

"No problem. I copied the voice off the tapes — the harmless parts, of course — and took it down to city hall. I know some of the *wahines* who work there as secretaries. I bought them some good lunch at the Wharf and asked them to listen. Two of them knew right away who it was."

Shayne lit a cigarette and raised an eyebrow, letting the big Samoan have his moment of drama.

"Frankie Tomashiro. That's our boy. He's a small-time politician who found his niche as a councilman. As chairman of the zoning committee, he wields a lot of power — it's a perfect position if he

decided to pad his income. He makes the papers a lot, usually political squabbles and fights over how much development is too much for Oahu."

"Can we get to see him?"

"That's the best part. I happen to know Frankie has a taste for young girls and the low-life parts of town. We can find him at one of his watering holes tonight if you want."

"I do," Shayne said. Briefly he outlined what had transpired with Gil Justin. "There's something going on under the surface here. I don't like the smell of it; he's too arrogant for a man worried much about blackmail. We'll dig a little deeper."

III

ACCORDING TO RUDY, THE SWING CLUB HAD A REPUTATION as the raunchiest nightspot in the islands. Nude revues, dope, half a dozen fights a night; it was a perennial hangout for Hotel Street's assorted hookers, pimps, and pushers. It looked to Shayne like it was pretty well managing to live up to its billing.

Wedging a place at the bar, Shayne ordered a Martell's for himself and a Primo for Rudy. Whatever came out of the amber bottle was only distantly related to the original contents. Shayne winced and bombed his stomach with a fiery swallow. Backs to the bar, they looked the place over.

Judging by the number of white uniforms and raucous yells, the fleet was in. The hard rock band was deafening and off-key. On a high stage to the left a not-so-young bleached blonde was showing off her stretch marks. Quite a recreation spot for a ranking member of the city council, Shayne mused.

Rudy nudged him. "That's our man."

Frankie Tomashiro was sitting in a shadowy rear booth, attended by a slender young Hawaiian girl with waist-length jet-black hair. Something unusual was going on, but the light was so poor Shayne couldn't tell what. The girl seemed to be in some kind of distress. Rudy and Shayne exchanged glances and left the bar, moving along opposite sides of the room until they converged at the booth.

The girl was whimpering softly. Shayne couldn't make out what the conversation was about, but Tomashiro was emphasizing his side of it by trying to dislocate some of her fingers. Shayne slid into the empty seat across from them while Rudy leaned on the back of the seat behind the pair.

"Let her go, Councilman."

"Get lost, *haoli*." He was a short, nervous-looking guy. Horn-rimmed glasses and a short haircut gave the deceptive impression of an exchange student from Tokyo University. Twenty years in the political wars hadn't marked him outwardly, but there was a glitter of malice in his black eyes.

Shayne reached across the table, caught his hand and did the same thing to him he was doing to the girl, rotating his little finger savagely. Tomashiro yelped and spilled his drink. He seemed to be spending a lot of his time lately yanking on various parts of people's anatomy, the detective reflected sourly.

Tomashiro jerked his hand away. "You bastard! Who the hell are you?"

Rudy tapped his shoulder. "He's with me. You remember me, Frankie. I had to take a fourteen-year-old away from you once. I don't know how you covered it up, but you did. We want to talk to you about some Manoa condos."

"You two are way out of line and you're about to be in bigger trouble than your mommas ever told you about."

"We can talk here." Rudy said, "or we can talk outside. In the alley."

"I don't know anything about that project."

"Wrong," Shayne said. "Let me lay it out for you. Gil Justin was in a cash bind. The Manoa development was sink or swim for him. He paid you off to push it through the zoning committee. Roger Hanson had a tap on Justin's phone and picked up the incriminating conversations. He put the squeeze on Justin for some political backing. What did he want from you?"

Tomashiro shook his head. "Uh-uh. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I've heard the tapes, my friend. I won't belabor the obvious — if nothing else it gives you a prime motive for bumping Hanson."

"I tell you I never talked to the man."

Shayne shrugged. "Alright. Let's suspend belief for a minute and say you weren't being blackmailed. Who else would Justin have had to buy to get those condos up so quickly?"

"Get bent."

Rudy grinned. He reached down, grabbed a handful of Tomashiro's silk aloha shirt, and hauled him halfway out of the seat.

"I'm going to say this once, Councilman. You can level with us and it all stops right here. Or you can keep on being a jerk, in which case we'll call the papers and leak the whole rotten story. They'll have a field day. The investigation would probably finish your sorry career." He let the smaller man slide back into the booth.

By now Tomashiro had practically cornered the market on sullen looks. "Try Elton Richards."

"The environmentalist?" Rudy scowled. "I can't buy that. His Children of the Earth group has been up at the project demonstrating since they started clearing the land."

"So he's keeping up appearances. Ask him why he didn't take Justin in front of the state legislature. He's tied up other developers for years."

"I thought he was Mr. Clean."

"Look, you wanted a name. I'm only guessing. But Mr. Richards has two ex-wives to support and we've worked a couple of angles together before. That's all I'm saying. For all I know, Justin could have bribed the governor."

"Yeah. Well, you're not off the hook yet," Rudy said, "but we'll check it out. Little sister, you want to slide out of here? This creep gives you any more grief, you call Rudy Tatupu. Okay?"

"Okay," the girl whispered. She fled, her face blank with fear.

Shayne leaned forward. "Listen closely, Councilman. We could hang your dirty laundry from the Aloha Tower but right now we're looking for bigger fish. So far the cops haven't made any connection between you and Roger Hanson. One peep out of you and we'll be sure they do. The best thing you can do is lay low and hope to hell we find somebody else with a better motive for murder. Understand?"

Tomashiro nodded meekly. That was laying it on a bit thick, Shayne realized, but he didn't want the man raising a stink with the law. It was funny how a possible case of blackmail by a dead man had evolved so quickly into a murder investigation. Each rock overturned exposed a new variety of slug.

"Let's go," he said. They left the councilman sitting there, the remains of his spilled drink puddling on the table and dripping slowly into his lap.

"What about this environmentalist, Richards?" Shayne asked as they made their way to the door. "Valerie and I saw some of his people up at the site this morning."

"Seems to me he's an unlikely fellow to be involved in a payoff.

He's the selfless type, supposedly dedicated only to protecting our beleaguered environment. He used to be a construction worker but he got sick of what was being done to the islands in the name of progress. Or so the press hype goes. Anyway, he organized Children of the Earth after a falling out with the Hawaii Ecological Coalition. He gets a lot of press, most of it admiring, though I do remember one editorial in the *Advertiser* that suggested he was just a little too good to be true. He's no stranger to jail, but all the arrests have been civil things, protest marches and sit-ins. The ex-wives are news to me."

"How in the world do you keep track of all this stuff?"

Rudy chuckled. "It's a small island."

THE NIGHT AIR FELT COOL AND CLEAN AFTER THE SMOKY confines of the club. As they turned up the street, someone grabbed Shayne's arm. He looked down. It was the girl who had been with Tomashiro.

"Mister," she said shyly. "Inside you talk about Roger Hanson. I know a good friend of his, can tell you plenty." She spoke in rapid, almost unintelligible pidgin English.

Rudy answered in kind. "Tell us, little one. We keep your face out of it, for sure."

"Here." She handed Shayne a folded up cocktail napkin. Inside was written a number. "You call here, ask for Esther. Tell her Lali said it's okay. She tell you about Mr. Hanson, maybe even tell you why he die."

"Thank you, Lali —"

"Never mind. You do me favor, save me from that pig. Now we even. *Mahalo*."

"*Mahalo*," Rudy said as she vanished into the night.

Shayne crammed the napkin into his pocket. "What do you think?"

"Worth checking. Listen, my friend, over here we have what you mainlanders would call the grapevine — on Oahu it's known as the 'coconut wireless.' It's strictly between the locals, designed to keep outsiders in the dark. If anything happened between Roger Hanson and a local, it's a good bet this Esther knows something about it."

"Okay, I'll give her a ring tomorrow. This has been quite an evening, Rudy. I'm coming up with all sorts of new slants on this thing."

They walked up Maunakea to the lot where Rudy's Cadillac was parked. The lighting was poor to nonexistent and as they approached the car, several hulking figures detached themselves from the shad-

ows.

"Uh-oh," Rudy said softly. Shayne counted four — no, five — men converging on them. Big bruisers, all shoulders and swag bellies and ham-sized fists — large enough to be construction workers, Shayne thought grimly.

"Back to back, between the cars!" he snapped. "Where's your gun?"

"Under the dash," Rudy said woefully.

"Swell. Here they come!"

The attackers hesitated a second, put off by the narrow space between the cars, which only allowed access to one at a time from each end. Then one waded into Shayne, waving what the detective suspected was a lead pipe. Things quickly became very intense.

As the man swung his weapon, Shayne ducked and lashed out with his left foot. The heel of his shoe cracked against a kneecap and sent the man reeling backwards with a howl of pain. He heard a terrific grunt as Rudy smashed his opponent in the midsection.

Another figure moved in, this one apparently armed only with his fists. They traded several savage punches, Shayne belatedly realizing that this was a delaying action. One of the others was climbing over the hood of the car to his left.

"Partner," he grunted between punches, "you've got to get into that car or they'll make mincemeat out of us."

The man on the hood launched himself at Shayne's head. He sidestepped, slamming a rock-hard fist into the belly of the stretched-out body. Then something hard struck his back, just above the kidneys, driving him into the car. Shayne slid along the fender. He realized Rudy must be down; there was no one protecting his back.

The redhead took three good shots, then lashed out with an elbow and felt teeth splinter. "Get that sonofabitch!" somebody yelled. Shayne battled to stay upright, no longer aware of individual opponents. If they dragged him to the pavement they would stomp him to death. His arms drove like pistons, each blow jarring painfully from fist to shoulder. But every time one went down there was another to take his place. And he was taking some vicious hits as well. Shayne felt his strength waning.

Suddenly the door behind him was ripped open, momentarily pinning one of his assailants against the other car. The unmistakable cannon roar of a .357 Magnum split the night. Rudy lunged out of the Cadillac, pistol waving. The fight was over in an instant, as figures

scattered in all directions.

"Whew!" Shayne wiped blood and sweat from his eyes. "I don't know how you managed it but I'm glad you did."

"Brother, you won't believe it. When they knocked me down I fell under the damn car. I don't know how, but I just crawled to the other side. I must have lost three pounds of hide."

"Did you hit anybody?"

"Naw. Just scared hell out of 'em."

"Then let's get out of here before the law arrives."

THEY DROVE BACK TO RUDY'S OFFICE FOR REPAIRS. SHAYNE had a cut eyebrow, bruises on both cheekbones, and a gash inside his mouth. His body felt like it had been driven over. Rudy wasn't in much better shape. Fortunately there was a bottle of medicinal brandy in the desk.

When he felt halfway human again, Shayne leaned back, closed his eyes, and said, "Theories?"

"Justin's either scared or mad. Or both. He's had somebody following you, to see if you rousted his buddy. When you did — bang! A warning to stay out of his business."

"Maybe. Or it may just be revenge for making him look like an ass in front of Valerie. Hoods like him are ninety percent ego. You know, I'm getting a bad feeling about this business; the more we learn, the less I like it. Roger Hanson appears to have been a lot less than a saint. I wonder what this girl — Esther — will tell us."

"Nothing good," Rudy said glumly. "Look; I've got to get home and explain to the wife what all these marks are. You need me in the morning?"

"No. I'm going to talk to Richards and Lali's friend. If I turn up anything I'll leave a message with your answering service. Be careful."

Back in his room Shayne performed a little more first aid; then, though it was after eleven, gave Valerie a ring. She seemed anxious as he gave her an edited account of the night's events, treating the fight as a minor fracas.

Sounding depressed, she said she just wanted to get it all over with. Maybe they should just give Justin the tapes and forget about it. Lieutenant Kalami had called. There were no new leads on Roger's murder. There was a hint in her voice that his company would be welcome. Shayne forced himself to ignore it and told her to hang in

there. Tomorrow he might have some answers.

He went to bed as soon as they hung up, soul full of virtue, body full of pain.

IV

GETTING UP THE NEXT MORNING WAS A MAJOR PROJECT. IT took Shayne a while to get from the bed to the shower. The hot water helped some with the stiffness, but his face was a little lopsided and extremely tender.

After breakfast, Shayne decided to try Elton Richards first. He looked up the address in the phone book and drove over. The Children of the Earth organization operated out of the lower half of an old two-story frame building on Kapiolani. The top part was taken up by a massage parlor bearing the name MAGIC FINGERS. Shayne grinned.

Richards answered the door. He was a lean, sunburned guy in his late thirties, trying to appear younger. He had long brown hair, thinning on top, a shaggy beard, and was dressed in cutoffs, sandals and the inevitable tee-shirt. The whole effect was spoiled somewhat by square-lensed, unrimmed bifocals which gave him a fuzzy appearance. His manner reminded Shayne of an insurance salesman, hyper-positive and a little too sincere. He stared briefly at the detective's cuts and bruises but didn't offer any comment.

Shayne followed him back into an office-cum-printshop. A doorway screened by a beaded curtain separated the room from his living quarters. Richards moved a stack of newspaper inserts off a straight-backed chair and waved him to it.

The environmentalist glanced pointedly at his watch. "I'm afraid I have an appointment with the Waikiki Improvement Association in half an hour. What exactly can I do for you, Mr. Shayne?"

The redhead decided to skip the subtleties. "Your name came up during a conversation with Frankie Tomashiro yesterday. It's his opinion that you can be bought."

Richards gaped for a second, then his jaw set. "The city councilman? What the devil are you talking about? I've never had any dealings with him."

"Maybe not. But you and he have something in common. Gil Justin bought you both off the Manoa project."

"You're mad! I've opposed that development from the start."

"Spare me the righteous indignation. I understand you could have held it up with appeals until Justin went broke. Why didn't you?"

His expression said Shayne was slipping rapidly on his list of all-time

favorite people. "Children of the Earth is a non-profit organization, Mr. Shayne. We depend on voluntary contributions for financial support. Our funds are limited. Unfortunately we can't take on everyone who's raping these islands. I decided to switch the emphasis to other projects that are likely to do even more damage than those condos."

"Ummmm. What about Roger Hanson? Did you know him?"

"I knew of him. I was sorry to hear about his death. He was a good lawyer and a popular man judging from what I heard."

"Have the police talked to you?"

"Certainly not. Why should they? I told you, I have no connection with those people."

"Alright, Richards, I won't take anymore of your time. But it looks to me like there's something dicey going on, and the trail leads from Roger Hanson to Gil Justin to Tomashiro to you."

"I don't know what you've been told, but I'd sooner take money from the Kalihi Mob than Justin. The man's a mercenary. He was one of the group that wanted to build high-rises on Diamond Head, for God's sake! That's beyond belief!"

"Yeah," Shayne said as he left, "but just think of the view from the penthouse."

SHAYNE STOPPED AT THE FIRST PHONE BOOTH AND DIALED the number he had been given by the young Hawaiian girl the night before. A voice so soft he could barely hear it answered on the third ring.

"Esther?"

"Yes."

"Esther?"

"Yes."

"My name is Michael Shayne. A friend of yours named Lali told me to call you. It's about Roger Hanson."

A pause. "Yes?"

"Look, I have some questions to ask. Can I come by and see you for a few minutes?"

"Yes." She gave him directions. "You can come now, alright?"

"I'll be there in a little while."

Shayne hung up and got back into his rented car. She lived on the windward side, in a little town called Waimanalo. It was a thirty minute drive. He found his way onto the H-1, turned off at the Pali Highway,

drove across the low, cloud-wrapped mountains and down into a bright green bowl bounded by sparkling ocean. He found the address in Waimanalo, a small bungalow, without too much trouble.

The first thing apparent to Shayne, when she opened the screen door, was that Esther was a good six or seven months pregnant. She was a beautiful Eurasian girl, coal-black hair piled loosely on her head, flawless brown skin, great almond eyes that regarded him with warmth and some sadness.

"Come in, please. I spoke to Lali after you called. She tells me you helped her out of some bad trouble." She shook her head. "Poor Lali. She always picks the wrong kind of people to associate with. Sit down and we will talk."

Shayne sat, accepted a cup of coffee while he considered what to say. Seeing Esther, a lot of things were suddenly very clear to him. When he finally asked, she confirmed without hesitation that it was Roger Hanson's baby that she was carrying. She seemed stoically resigned to his death and her loss.

"Tell me about him."

"He was very unhappy, Mr. Shayne. Even when we were together there was sadness. He and his wife were not in love. He had problems in his work. I think he even knew that he was going to die."

Shayne frowned. "Did he ever talk to you about his enemies?"

"Not directly. But he spoke of corruption everywhere in the business. He talked of leaving his practice, of buying a small place on Maui and raising pineapples. He laughed when he said it, but I believe he truly wanted out."

"What about his wife?"

She shrugged. "I do not think they would have stayed together long."

Shayne sighed. It was the oldest story in the world. He had become hardened to it in his line of work, but this time it was an old friend and a woman he had once been-at least a little in love with.

"Will you keep the baby?"

"Yes, of course. It will be a son. It is all I have left of him."

"Does Mrs. Hanson know about you?"

"I do not think so. And I must ask that you keep my secret. She has no claim on what happened between us and it would only hurt her now to know."

"When did you last see Roger?"

"On the day before he disappeared. He came here after work."

"Anything unusual?"

"He was upset, I think. There was trouble with a client. He would not say who. He was depressed and stayed less time than usual."

"Frightened?"

"No, he seemed to believe it was something he could handle. He was never afraid, Mr. Shayne. Disgusted, tired, lonely, yes; but not afraid." Her eyes locked with his. Tell me about Roger and how you knew him."

Shayne did, emphasizing how Hanson had once saved his life. It was all she would have. Afterwards he left, still uncertain about motives for murder, but more and more disturbed by the sordid tale he was unraveling.

AS HE COASTED DOWN THE LONG SLOPE BACK INTO THE CITY, Shayne realized he was only a few miles from the Manoa site. He decided to drop in on Justin. The anger and frustration were clotting up inside him, demanding action, some kind of catalyst to break this case wide open. Then there was last night. The redhead touched his sore face and smiled, not pleasantly.

Gil Justin was standing outside the trailer, talking to some foremen, when Shayne drove up. He didn't seem particularly surprised to see the detective. When the men had gone back to their jobs, supervising the pouring of foundations, Shayne strolled over to the developer. He had a large band-aid on his forehead.

"Anyone miss work this morning?" Shayne asked sardonically.

"Hello, hotshot." Justin looked tough, animal-dangerous even in the bright sunshine. "I don't follow you."

"Just wondering if any of your boys felt worse than I do." He stepped forward until he was staring down at Justin.

"Get lost, mister. I got work to do."

"Mrs. Hanson has made up her mind about the tapes. Your price is acceptable." It was an abrupt, unplanned decision, based solely on a hunch that bubbled to the surface. "You can have them — on one condition."

"Yeah?"

"When I turn them over I want to hear all you know about Roger Hanson. Not just that he was blackmailing you. There has to be more than that. You're too confident."

"What about copies?"

"I don't think you're really worried about that. As you said, if you

go down you drag his reputation with you. You're safe enough. Unless you're arrested for suspicion of murder. Then the cops could get everything. So if you help me you'll be helping yourself too. The longer this drags on, the more chance you have of becoming involved."

Justin shrugged. "I'm not worried. I did a little checking on you, Shayne. A bigtime private eye from Miami. Hanson was a buddy of yours, right? And now maybe you got the hots for his old lady. Some pal."

"Don't push it," Shayne said softly. Something in his eyes stopped Justin.

"Okay, forget it. You got a deal. Tell you what: we knock off here around six-thirty at night. You be here at eight with the tapes. I'll have the cash and I'll tell you a little something that just might surprise you." He grinned. "And this evens us up for last night too."

"Only if it's good. I don't want garbage and I've talked to enough people to know if you're feeding me any."

"It'll be grade-A. Now I got work to do. Be here this evening with the tapes."

Shayne smiled slightly as he walked away. He had tried a gambit and gotten a response. It was still not definite, but he had a feeling things had just shifted, that the whole ugly mess was getting ready to ooze out into the light of day. He climbed into the rented Buick and drove down into the city.

SHAYNE GOT IN TOUCH WITH RUDY AND THEY HAD LUNCH under the banyon tree at the Moana Hotel. The *mahi-mahi* was fine, but most of his attention was on the discussion.

"I did some checking around this morning," the Samoan said. "A few of the union halls. It won't be hard to tie Justin to our little rendezvous last night." He wore dark glasses to cover his black eye.

Shayne related his morning's activities. "He practically admitted it when we made our deal.. But I think this new angle has some promise. He knows something. Much as I'd like to hang Justin by the shorts, it just doesn't follow that he'd kill the man who was blackmailing him without having his hands on the tapes. That leaves Tomashiro and Richards who were involved in the Manoa buy-off. Could one of them have done it?"

"Hard to say. Both of them have a lot to lose if word about the bribery gets out. Of course, we don't know that there is any evidence at all against Richards. Just the word of a crooked councilman. Again,

why kill a man when it could turn the whole thing loose?"

Shayne stabbed at his fish. "Maybe I'm trying to make too much out of this blackmail business. It's what Valerie wanted my help with and I keep trying to tie it to Roger's death. There could be a completely different motive for the killing. Robbery. Revenge. Passion."

"Which has to be how the cops are proceeding, since they don't seem to have checked up on any of these folks. Do you think we ought to — uh-oh, speaking of the devil . . . ?"

The detective turned. Lieutenant Russ Kalami was coming toward them. He was not smiling. "Not yet," Shayne said quickly.

The HPD officer pulled out a chair and sat. "Gentlemen. I've received a complaint. From a citizen who wishes to remain nameless. He alleges threats and harassment have been used against him. He named and gave a very accurate description of you, Shayne. *Now what in the hell is going on?*"

"I made a few inquiries," Shayne said calmly. "There was no intimidation."

"And the subject of those inquiries?"

"That's none of your business."

"Bullshit! You're sticking your nose into the Hanson murder. I warned you about staying out of a police investigation. You have no permit to operate here, Shayne. I could have you thrown in jail. And you," he turned on Rudy, "you're trying to front for him. I could pull your license right now."

"Take it easy, Lieutenant." The big Samoan spread his hands. "Let me explain it to you. Mrs. Hanson is a client of mine. I'm doing some investigating for her and Mr. Shayne here is assisting me, doing some of the legwork. It's not directly related to the murder of her husband, as far as we know. If we run across any information relative to your investigation we'll turn it over to you."

Kalami was livid. "I want everything you've got, anyone you've talked to, right now."

"I can't do that. At this time it's privileged information. Once my investigation is finished you can have a look at it — with my client's permission."

"Alright. I'll get a subpoena." The policeman pulled himself together with an effort. "As for you, Shayne, I want you off this island by tomorrow, bag and baggage. If you're not gone I'll have you locked up. Our anonymous citizen can be persuaded to press charges. And in the meantime there'll be no more investigating of any kind. Clear?"

Shayne bristled. "Lieutenant, you've been watching too many Hawaii-Five-O reruns. This isn't your own personal island where you can ride roughshod over people. I know, your investigation hasn't gone anywhere and you're frustrated. But don't try to take it out by leaning on me. I'll help you when I can, if I can. That's all."

They locked stares for a long moment, then Kalami stood up, slammed his chair into the table, and stalked away.

Rudy looked at Shayne. "Who?"

"Not Justin. My guess is Tomashiro. He's got political pull and he's the one we really leaned on."

"But why take the chance of exposing his part in the buy-off?"

"I don't know. Unless he's afraid we'll stumble onto something worse."

"Well. What do we do now?"

"You've done enough. I don't want to get you in anymore trouble. You can't afford to lose your license with that family of yours."

Rudy started to protest but Shayne cut him off. "I've got to see this thing through, at least as far as Justin. I have a feeling he has the key. I do need one thing. Have you got an unregistered gun, one that can't be traced back to you?"

"Yeah. A .38 Python I picked up in a crap game. Filed clean."

"Let me have it. And the tapes. Then go someplace where you've got a lot of people to alibi you and stay put."

"Where are you going?"

"Right now, to see Valerie. I've got some tough questions to ask about her husband."

SHE MET HIM AT THE DOOR, BREATHTAKING IN A YELLOW and white tennis outfit. "You look awful. I thought it was just a little fight."

Shayne laughed. "I've been in worse."

"Well, come on in and let me build you a drink. Then you can tell me what in the world's been going on."

They went back to the enclosed lanai again. Shayne asked for a Martell and a side-glass of ice-water. Valerie was back shortly, carrying it and something tall and fruity for herself. She slumped down opposite him on a redwood recliner.

"Now. Recite, please."

Shayne covered most of it, from Tomashiro to Richards to Justin again, leaving out only the girl at the Swing Club and his talk with

Esther. When he had finished, she was clearly upset.

"I don't like it, this meeting with Justin tonight. It could be a trick. Or a trap. I don't know. Let me mail him the damned tapes. He can keep his lousy five grand."

"I can't. It's the best chance I'll have to learn something about what was really going on. Val, there's no good way to say this. I've heard some unpleasant and unexpected things about Roger. I need to ask you about them. It's important that I know if they're true."

Her eyes glistened but they met Shayne's directly. "Go ahead."

"How honest do you think he really was?"

She chewed at her lip. "He was lawyer-honest, businessman-honest. In other words, whatever the law would allow. He might not have deliberately committed a criminal act, but I doubt if he ever missed a loophole either."

"What about with you?"

"Roger was no saint. He liked women. I found that out during the first year of our marriage. I guess it's a lot like a dog that chases cars; once he gets started he can't be cured. It was either learn to live with it or pack my bags. But whatever he did, Roger was smart. I'm sure he was discreet and avoided entanglements," she added bitterly.

Shayne was listening with part of his mind. The rest was preoccupied, weighing and absorbing the impact of her. She sat on the edge of the recliner, so close their knees almost touched. The tennis brief was very brief. Her arms and legs were brown and smooth. Fine golden hairs along the tops of her thighs glistened in the sunlight. Exercise had left traces of color in her cheeks which, along with the tied-back hair, made her look almost teenaged.

"I don't want to be cruel," he said finally, "but it opens up a new line of thinking about his murder. A lot more people have been killed over a woman than over a robbery or blackmail."

There was something in her eyes he couldn't read. She stared at him, breathing shallowly. Her hand reached out, hesitated, then rested on his. It was like closing an electrical circuit. She came into Shayne's arms as smoothly and naturally as if it had been hours instead of years since the last time. Her lips were warm, demanding.

Something inside Shayne shut down. It was too soon. He pushed her gently away and took a huge breath.

"Sorry." Valerie laughed a bit shakily and reached for a cigarette. "No, I'm not. You're a man, Mike, a man like Roger never was. Why couldn't it have been you?"

Shayne shifted uncomfortably. "Listen, Val, we can talk about this later. At least now I know you won't be totally wiped out by whatever I learn tonight."

"I can handle anything now. But I still don't like it, you going up there. You could be setting yourself up."

"Justin doesn't have any reason to go after me. All he wants is the tapes. Look, the meeting is set for eight; if I'm not back here in two hours, call the cops and let them in on it. Don't worry; I'll be very careful."

"You do that," Valerie said sadly, but she smiled a little.

THE REST OF THE DAY DRAGGED BY ON LEADEN FEET.
Shayne hated this part of investigations, the endless periods of time when you had to wait for the next major event. Gnawed at by uneasiness, he paced his hotel room, walked for miles along the crowded beach, and finally went into the International Marketplace, where he picked up Lucy's Tiki — a two-foot-high chunk of polished hardwood carved into a scowling, elongated face, big on teeth.

Back in the room, he called United and got a reservation for the following day. Whether he used it or not depended on what went down tonight, but in case Kālami checked it would look like he intended to cooperate.

On impulse he decided to call Lucy. With the six hour time difference it would be close to ten o'clock back there. He dialed her home number.

"Hi, Angel; it's me."

"Michael!" Her voice was happy. "Where are you? *How* are you?"

"Still in Honolulu." Briefly he told her what had been going on. "I seem to be wearing out my welcome with the police. What's new there?"

"A couple of new clients are waiting for you to get back. One of them has a *very* interesting problem. Otherwise, it's routine. Hurry home, okay?"

"I will." They chatted warmly for a few minutes and hung up. Suddenly all Shayne wanted was to be back in Miami, with Lucy and Tim Rourke and his other friends and familiar places. He was weary of Honolulu's gaudy facade, behind which everything and everyone seemed to be tainted. After this afternoon, even Valerie didn't hold as much attraction for him. Shayne drank coffee and paced some more.

Soon it would be time to go.

V

SHAYNE PULLED UP IN FRONT OF GIL JUSTIN'S TRAILER AT A quarter to eight. The dirty Corvette was there and the trailer door was part way open. As he climbed stiffly out of the car, the first thing that struck him was the silence.

The bulldozers were parked now, hulking like prehistoric beasts in the gathering dusk. The pile-drivers threw hundred foot shadows. A backhoe sat near a pile of plastic sewer pipe, its shovel resting at the end of a long trench running from the building site toward the road.

He rapped the horn ring twice but there was no sign of life. Shayne reached back in the car and slid Rudy's .38 from the glove compartment. The open door beckoned so he looked inside the trailer first. Nobody home. He came back outside and stood on the steps, whistling tunelessly between his teeth. Maybe Justin had left the car and was coming back later. But it didn't feel right.

The sun was dying behind a low bank of clouds, casting a hint of blood along its track on the ocean far below. From this altitude the water looked mirror flat. One of the sunset cruise ships moved slowly southward past Diamond Head. A 747 appeared frozen in the sky as it climbed out of Honolulu International. Skeins of headlighted traffic decorated the coastal highways. The engine of the Buick clicked and pinged as it cooled; otherwise it was unnaturally quiet.

A soft groan came from the trench.

Shayne brought the .38 up and moved carefully around the far end of the trailer. No one jumped out at him. The noise came again, from near the backhoe. He tiptoed to the edge of the trench.

A man was lying at the bottom on his back. It looked like Justin, even in the uncertain light. Shayne knelt at the edge of the four-foot hole to get a better look. That was when the guy who had been hiding behind the backhoe made his move.

All Shayne saw was the blurred movement of the shovel from the corner of his eye. It came around in a whistling, head-high arc. The edge would have taken away half the detective's skull, but it was the flat part that caught him, just above the left ear. It struck with an incredible ringing sound and spun him away into darkness.

SHAYNE CAME AROUND SLOWLY TO WHAT FELT LIKE RAIN patterning down on his body. The smell of raw earth was overpowering. Then the drops started to get heavier. What the hell! He pried open

an eyelid, sticky with blood.

Shayne was lying in the trench, his legs across Gil Justin. The rain was a shower of dirt, pouring down from the lip of the hole in ever larger clods. A diesel engine growled under its load and the ground trembled.

Panic clogged his throat. Shayne drove his unwilling body to *move!* He made it to his hands and knees before the world caved in. What felt like half a ton of earth came thundering down into the trench. He had come close to drowning in a Gulf storm once — the sensation of being buried alive was terrifyingly similar.

Somehow Shayne got his head down between his knees, back hunched against the cascade of dirt, creating a tiny breathing space. Light and sound disappeared. The weight was crushing, the onset of slow suffocation almost unbearable.

A roaring noise began to swell in his head. Shayne heaved upwards with a strength born of claustrophobic terror. The dirt gave fractionally, then settled back heavier than before. His lungs burned. He tried to recall how long it took before the brain starved from lack of oxygen.

Shayne tried to dig with his fingers. It was useless. Tiny rivulets of dirt pattered down, not enough to do any good. Every joint in his body screamed in protest at the relentless weight bearing down on him.

Something began thumping into the dirt above him. Shayne felt the vibrations and then a slight lessening of the pressure. After a few moments a hard edge scraped across his back. He put the last of his air into a muffled yell.

Long seconds later a blessed draught of air reached the redhead. He heaved again and his head and shoulders broke free. He sucked air. His pulse was hammering away like an outboard engine. Nothing was ever sweeter than the warm night breeze that brushed his face.

"My God, brother! They nearly killed you!" Rudy Tatupu was bending over Shayne, his face anguished, the shovel he had been digging with shaking in his hands.

"Justin!" Shayne croaked, struggling to get up out of the trench. "He's down there. Dig!"

It took five agonizing minutes, hands and shovel between them, to uncover Justin and drag him out. He wasn't breathing. Rudy tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. After twenty minutes, when he hadn't responded, they gave up.

Shayne leaned against a wheel of the backhoe, his breathing still

ragged, willing his limbs to stop quivering. "I thought you were going to stay out of this one."

Rudy grinned: "Hell, I got five guys who'll swear that right now I'm sitting in on a big poker game in Waipahu. You owe me a case of good scotch."

"You've got it. Whew! Talk about climbing out of your own grave. Did you see anybody when you got here?"

"Whoever it was shut down the backhoe when he saw my lights and ran off into the trees. I just caught a glimpse of him. Too far away to make out anything."

"Alright. It doesn't matter." Shayne patted his pockets. The tapes were gone. "I've got most of the answers now anyway. I should have figured it sooner but I broke a cardinal rule — never overlook the obvious."

He climbed slowly to his feet. As he did, something crunched beneath his shoe. He reached down and picked up the shattered object.

"Ahhh — that's the clincher."

Rudy stared at him blankly. "You okay, brother?"

"Help me find that .38. Give me ten minutes headstart and then call the rescue squad for Justin. This really is one I have to finish on my own." He handed what he had picked up to Rudy. "You can keep these for the cops."

It was a pair of square-lensed, rimless bifocals.

SHAYNE MADE A SHAMBLES OF THE TRAFFIC LAWS GETTING to downtown Honolulu. Someone else might have stopped at the closest bar for a stiff one and settled for a phone call to HPD. Well, an eye for an eye might not be in vogue anymore, but attempts on his life made the big redhead surly as hell.

He parked half a block away from Children of the Earth headquarters, slipped the gun inside his belt, and crossed the street. The front window was dark but there was a glow of light from somewhere in back. The MAGIC FINGERS was getting its share of the tourist trade. He had to wait a few minutes before he jimmeyed the front door lock and stepped inside.

A radio was faintly mumbling something about disco fever. Shayne pussyfooted around chairs and brochure racks and pushed open the door to the inner office.

Elton Richards was bent over his desk, busy cleaning out the

drawers, stuffing the contents into a small suitcase. He didn't realize Shayne was there until the detective thumbed back the hammer of the .38. It made a deadly, unmistakable sound.

"Put your hands on top of the desk," he said, "and lean hard on them."

Shayne was an impressive and scary sight, covered with dirt and tracks of dried blood, his eyes cold with anger. Richards stared wildly for a moment, weighing his chances. Then he put his hands on the desk. Shayne stepped into the room.

"Justin's dead. That makes two counts of murder plus one attempted. Was it worth it?"

Shayne could see him searching for his glibness. Finally Richards said, "You're raving, my friend. I don't know what you're talking about. I've been here all evening, clearing up some paperwork."

"Step around to the end of the desk," Shayne said, and waited until he did. "Your shoes are muddy. And those aren't the glasses you were wearing this morning. I'm afraid your good ones are shot. What was the next move? A little jaunt to the Far East?"

Richards shrugged. "It's your story. Okay, you think I killed Gil Justin, I guess because of this payoff business you've been fantasizing about. Who else am I supposed to have offed?"

"How about Roger Hanson?"

The environmentalist laughed. "Whatever you're smoking, I'll have a toke. Hey, every cop on the island is looking for the guy who blew him away. Why me?"

"Because you've been making it with his wife. The two of you murdered him. There's only one way you could have found out I was meeting with Justin tonight."

Shayne had been aware of the shadowy figure behind the hanging-covered doorway to Richards' living quarters. "Alright, Val, you can come out now."

She parted the hangings and walked slowly into the room. "Hello, Mike." She was striking in a beige travel suit with a white Panama hat and an oversized straw shoulder bag. "I suppose you have it all figured out."

"Most of it. The rest I can piece together. You and Roger were cheating on each other. It must have been a lovely situation. My guess is he got fed up with it all. He was about to dump you and go off with his Eurasian girlfriend. You do know about her? I thought so. Anyway, no big deal except there goes all that green stuff you love so much."

And your friend here is cash-poor, thanks to a couple of former wives. So you two decided to kill Roger to keep control of his money."

She wasn't outwardly impressed. "What else?"

"Richards was the trigger man. He brought it off — the details don't really matter — and five days later it looked like both of you were in the clear. The police were hunting for robbery suspects. But two things happened that you hadn't expected. First, Gil Justin started looking for some tapes Roger had made. Then I showed up." Shayne smiled grimly. "I must have been the last person in the world you wanted to see at that funeral. A hardheaded private eye, here to give you help you didn't want. But you had to do something. You decided to sic me on Justin, thinking that the payoff business was a totally separate problem, hoping I'd dead-end on that and maybe get him off your back as well."

"This bastard knows it all!" Richards snarled.

"Keep your hands flat," Shayne warned him. "You had some bad luck, Val. In bunches, or it might have worked. I thought too much of you to be suspicious.. But it started to unravel when I learned that Tomashiro was the city official involved. Then he mentioned Richards. Maybe he wasn't even a part of the payoffs, but now there was a connection. All you could do was keep up the weeping widow act and try to convince me to drop the whole thing and give Justin the tapes. Richards even complained to the law of harassment, hoping they'd discourage me."

"But you wouldn't quit."

"No. You even threw yourself at me. The ultimate gift. I'm not sure if Justin knew about your little affair or what, but he had something. When you found out he was going to talk to me tonight after I turned over the tapes, that was it. You couldn't take the chance. So you decided to get rid of us both and count on the confusion to give you two enough time to get off the island. Pretty coldblooded."

"A lot of guesses and maybes, darling."

"Tell me another way it could have worked and you can walk out of here right now."

She laughed harshly. "Kill him, El."

Richards reacted like a trained Doberman. He made a wild-eyed leap at Shayne, arms outstretched. The detective sidestepped and clipped him neatly on the side of the neck. The blow sent him reeling backwards into the desk.

Later Shayne would chalk it up to being tired and half-stunned

from his ordeal. Or maybe it was because he still couldn't accept what she was capable of. From the corner of his eye he saw Valerie's hand dart into the shoulder bag. The snub-nosed automatic barked once. A small black mark appeared on Richards' forehead as he slid slowly down against the desk.

Shayne slammed the barrel of the .38 across her wrist. There was a sharp, cracking sound. The automatic clattered to the floor. Valerie's face went white with pain as she clutched her broken wrist. Slowly she raised her eyes to his.

"Why, Mike? I wouldn't have hurt you. It's all over now."

The .38 didn't waver. "What kind of ruthless bitch are you?"

"A survivor, darling. Roger taught me that. No matter what happens, take the advantage. She moved closer to him. "You're a survivor too. You proved that tonight. I've got two tickets to Hong Kong. Come with me. We'll make up for the last seven years."

Shayne stared at her in disgusted fascination. Maybe it was his imagination; he thought he saw in her eyes a hint of the same bloody hue that had flared briefly in the Manoa sunset. He recognized it now; it was the color of greed, of total self-absorption, or something close to madness. He shook himself.

"If I hadn't made it out of that trench, you'd be saying the same thing to Richards. No, Val. A lifetime suite in Halawa Prison, that's where your ticket is to."

She smiled like an angel in spite of her pain. "It's your word against mine. There's no proof. We destroyed the tapes. Elton was the last link. You see, I shot him in self defense. My story is that you tried to take advantage of a poor, bereaved widow. Roger's friends will flock to my side."

Shayne walked to the phone on the desk, dialed the operator, asked for HPD homicide. Emergency.

"You'll lose again, Mike. I'll never spend a day in jail."

"One thing, Val." She stared at him. "You forgot about Rudy. He's the one who got me out of that trench. He knows the whole story. Now be quiet."

Someone answered at the other end.

"Get me Lieutenant Kalami," Shayne said wearily. "Tell him I've got a present for him."

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The voluptuous and incredibly efficient Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers had been up against rapists and killers before, but this one's m.o. boggled even her mind!

The Rape of the Mannequins

by MEL D. AMES

TUESDAY, MAY 3RD.

Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers was alone in her Homicide-Division office at Metro Central's Eleventh Precinct. She was seated at her desk, hunched forward in the chair with her hands up under her rumpled blouse. She was in the midst of an unscheduled, but critical adjustment to a snarled bra strap. And at that inopportune moment, the door to the office was suddenly thrown open.

“ ‘Allo, ‘allo! Wot’s goin’ on ‘ere, then?”

Detective-Sergeant Mark Swanson stood in the doorway rendering his sadly inept impression of a London bobby. He kicked the door shut as he entered the office, then stood back to deliberate on his beautiful partner’s curious plight, with *unseemly* interest.

“The old ‘ammock’s finally come a cropper then, ‘as it, Mum?’”

Cathy Carruthers glared up at him from behind a curtain of disheveled golden hair, and abruptly swiveled her chair and herself out of his view and further embarrassment. To her silently struggling

back, in his own voice now, Mark added, "Which reminds me, lieutenant, the chief wants to see us. Something about a rape."

When she turned again to face him, Cathy Carruthers, though flushed, was now "decent" and seethingly calm. "I don't know what bothers me most, Mark," she asserted evenly between clenched white teeth, "your sudden intrusion on my privacy; your snide reference to an intimate article of my attire as a *hammock*; or simply that seeing me so rudely indisposed, should evoke in your one-track plebeian brain nothing more uplifting than (of all things!) an act of rape!"

Mark's eyes were wide with innocent wonder. "*Uplifting?*" He seemed almost to weigh the word.

The lieutenant favored her chosen partner with dark disaffection for several tense moments; then, with a sudden expulsion of breath, she broke into a squeal of uninhibited laughter.

"That was a poor choice of words, wasn't it?" she admitted finally, grinning up at him through a mist of tears. "Still, you weren't being very gallant, you know. You could at least have turned your back."

Mark made a valiant effort to look the injured party. "Lieutenant," he said solemnly, "with all due deference to the British Constabulary, I feel duty-bound to insist that I *did* act in a true gentlemanly manner; which, I hasten to suggest, is why you now find yourself still delightfully unsullied and free from ravishment, and, in spite of the almost irrepressible compulsions of my deepest and darkest urges — "

The lieutenant raised a hand in protest. "Enough already." She dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex tissue. "Now, what's this business about the chief?"

"He wants you in his office, PDQ."

"About a rape?"

"So he says. But don't worry, lieutenant, I'll be there to protect you."

Cathy Carruthers leveled her glistening blue eyes on him as she got to her feet. "That's like asking a lion to mind a lamb," she chuckled. "Come on, killer, let's find out what's bugging the chief."

As Mark followed the lieutenant out the door, he treated her to his best, impromptu rendition of the MGM lion.

CHIEF HENRY (HANK) HELLER WAS A CRAGGY LOOKING man with short gray hair and deeply chiseled features. He rose with a genial grunt from his chair as Cathy Carruthers and Mark Swanson

entered his office.

"Lieutenant. Sergeant." The chief extended a gnarled hand to each of them in turn, motioned them to a chair, then settled himself back comfortably behind his desk. "Got a P.R. problem," he said simply.

"So what else is new, chief?" The lieutenant arched a perfect eyebrow. "What's it this time, police brutality?"

In answer, Chief Heller made a steeple with his fingers, pursed his lips against it, and squinted thoughtfully at his top investigative team. They were, he decided, a truly remarkable pair.

Mark was ruggedly, almost boyishly handsome. A powerfully-built six-footer, with tousled brown hair and laughing blue-gray eyes that seemed to be permanently crinkled with imminent mischief. Cathy Carruthers, better known as *The Amazon* to her loyal colleagues, though equally tall (with the help of 3-inch heels) was a paradox of such outrageous beauty and sheer physical strength and intelligence, that she seemed at times to go beyond the pale of mortal blood and bone. They had built between them, she and Mark, an unspoken, mutual bond of respect and deep affection.

"There's been a rash of burglaries," the chief told them, "in the large department stores across the state line. Huntsville, to be precise. Speers, The Bay Co., The Broadwalk and P.C. Peter's — they've all been hit, with Speers and P.C. Peter's coming down as two-time losers. Same M.O. in every one of them. No signs of forced entry, or exit. Weird. Then, last night, the Speers store out at Pinetree Park was hit, right here in Metro. And that, boys and girls, dumps the ball squarely in our court."

"They're blowing the safes?"

"It's not a 'they,' Mark, it's-a 'him.' And if he was into safes, he'd probably have tripped an alarm by now, and they'd have nailed him." The chief gave a weary shrug. "This guy seems to have a real talent for spotting small, high-priced items that are easy to tote. And he comes and goes as if by magic. My guess is, he probably cases each location the day before he pulls the job. Easy enough to do when the store is full of shoppers. Anyway, he's managed to get away with a couple of thou in merchandise on every haul. But," he eyed them both, closely, "there's more to it than that."

"I sure hope so." Cathy Carruthers couldn't hide a certain impatience. "So far, all this adds up to is a penny-ante heist. Store security ought to be able to handle that kind of situation on their own. So, what else does he take?"

"It's not so much what he takes," the chief replied with a mirthless chuckle, "it's what he leaves behind."

"You've lost me, chief."

"Every time this guy commits a burglary, lieutenant, he rapes a mannequin."

Cathy Carruthers glanced uncertainly at Mark. She didn't appear to know whether to laugh, cough, or just blush a li^{te}? "You're putting us on," she said finally.

"I'm giving it to you straight, lieutenant. This guy's got the hots for mannequins."

"The hots?" Mark's ingenuous face reflected his total incredulity. "For mannequins?"

"Yeah. You know, those life-like dummies they stick in the stores and dress up like real people."

"I know what a mannequin is, chief, but how the hell —?"

"And he has a preference for blondes."

"Oh?" This time Mark did laugh. "That should be a comfort to the brunettes and the redheads. So why don't they just stow away all the blonde mannequins until the guy's been caught? If nothing else, it would sure cut down on the laundry bill."

"Mark!" Cathy Carruthers gave her partner a grim look of reproach.

"Not a chance, Mark. Do you have any idea how many blonde mannequins there are, scattered around the country?"

"No, sir, I don't imagine he does." The lieutenant eased herself up out of her chair. She was looking somewhat miffed. "This is all very, uh — enlightening, chief, but Mark and I are assigned to Homicide, remember? This case (thank God!) doesn't quite fit into our pigeonhole —"

"Sit down, lieutenant." The chief waved her back down into the chair. "I haven't finished yet. Not by a long shot."

"You mean this gentleman has other talents?"

"That's exactly what I mean, lieutenant, and he's no gentleman. Last night, a watchman caught him in the act."

"The act of what?" the lieutenant asked cautiously. "Burglary, or rape?"

"Both. I guess."

"So then you've got an I.D.?" It was more a statement than a question.

"No, lieutenant, we haven't. But we have got a killer on the loose. The watchman was found early this morning, with his throat slit

from ear to ear."

"WELL, NOW." LIEUTENANT CARRUTHERS NUDGED HER beautiful nose with an elegantly flexed knuckle. "That puts a different light on it. Why didn't you say it was a homicide to begin with?"

"Are you kidding?" The chief gave a lecherous snort. "And miss out on seeing your reaction to the part about the mannequins?"

The lieutenant acknowledged Chief Heller's quaint sense of humor with a derisive curl of her upper lip. "You're a regular four-alarm fire, chief," she said tediously. But a moment later she was leaning forward in her chair, her vivid blue eyes bright with interest.

"It's a bit like getting someone else's unsolved case-file, I must admit," she mused, "but it occurs to me that a guy as kinky as this one shouldn't be all that hard to pin down." She looked to Mark as though to confirm that here, indeed, was a "puzzler" worthy of her efforts. She turned to the chief. "We're going to need a catch-up file on this, chief; everything relevant to the case that has happened up to date, and back to the time of the first burglary — "

"You got it, lieutenant. As a matter of fact, Corporal Leprohn has already been alerted and he's working on it right this minute. But before you get carried away, lieutenant, there's something else we should discuss."

"Your P.R. problem," she prompted intuitively.

"Hmmm. Right on the ball, eh?" Chief Heller leaned back with a doubtful smile, his hands locked behind his head. He was a striking man. His age could have been anywhere between forty and sixty, in spite of the gray hair. "Let me see if I can put this together for you," he said reflectively.

"All through this epidemic of burglaries," he began, "store management has been belly-aching for a quiet investigation, for obvious reasons. Frankly, I can't say that I blame them. But the Media picked up on that fiasco with the mannequins right off the bat, and they're the culprits who began to label each one of the burglar's little escapades as a 'rape.' In blazing bloody headlines yet: MIDNIGHT MARAUDER RAPES HIS THIRD MANNEQUIN! I mean (Christ!) you tell me, lieutenant, how the hell's a guy going to rape a dummy — ?"

"I'd rather not, thank you."

"— and even if he does, *so what?*"

"Yeah, *so what?*" Mark echoed the words with a lascivious chuckle.

"Anyway, the stores apparently all got together and threatened to hire on some private investigation outfit. They said the police were giving the whole thing too much publicity. Bad for business, they said. Bull! It was the snoops from the Media who were doing all the damage. And to make matters worse, by the time the guy had made his third haul, and diddled his third dummy, the burglaries were strung out over three separate shopping centers. There just wasn't any way to keep a lid on it."

"This was all prior to the murder, of course."

"Right. He hit the stores a total of six times before leaving the Huntsville area. And now, with the death of the watchman last night, here in Metro, and another deflowered blonde within arms-length of the body — well, that's it."

"That's it?"

"What I mean, is, we might have been persuaded to pull back to an advisory role (given the collective civic pressure from the management of four major store chains), as long as it was only burglary, and, involving their own crummy merchandise. We might have even considered turning a blind eye to their fetishistic rapist, as long as he didn't deviate (if you'll pardon the pun) from those paint-and-plaster dummies — *but murder?* No way, Jose!"

"Did it occur to you, chief, that this Metro caper might be the work of a copy-catter, and that your ithyphallic thief might still be back in Huntsville?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it did. But at this stage of the game, who can say — *ithyphallic*?"

"Why, you can, chief. And very well, too." The lieutenant rewarded him with an irritating smile. "Which, as we all know," she said demurely, "simply means that he is not a very nice man."

The chief grunted noncommittally. "Just one thing more, lieutenant, before you leave — "

"Keep it low key," she interjected, widening her smile when she saw that she had second-guessed him for the second time.

The chief let out a low moan as he rolled his eyes up in the general direction of Cop Heaven. "Maybe," he said to the peeling paint on the ceiling, "just maybe, that's what this cockamamie case needs."

"Chief?"

"A woman's intuition, lieutenant. A rare commodity with which you seem to be uncommonly well endowed. And need I remind you, that until last night's murder, all the victims in this case have been

women — at least of a kind.”

“Yeah,” Mark agreed, “and blondes, to boot.” He exchanged conspiratorial winks with the chief.

IT WAS WELL PAST THE LUNCH HOUR WHEN LIEUTENANT Carruthers and Mark Swanson sauntered into Speers’ body fashions department in the Pinetree Park Shopping Center. The actual site where the murder had taken place, was now indistinguishable from any other area in the store. The victim and the violated mannequin, the spilled blood, and even the chalked outline of the body, had all been removed or cleaned away. The lieutenant’s questions to the salesgirls about the recent murder were met with detailed recollections of horror; but about the put-upon dummy, they evoked only embarrassed titterings.

“We might as well grab ourselves some lunch,” the lieutenant said to Mark with a beleaguered sigh. “There’s nothing left to see here but a bunch of empty hammocks, as you so brutally call them.” She tugged at his sleeve, drawing him reluctantly away from an erotic, promotional display of lingerie that had been aptly entitled: GO’ PAGAN IN PINK.

“I’m just partial to pink,” Mark objected lamely as she steered him toward the store’s bustling cafeteria.

The lieutenant, however, was visibly perturbed as they maneuvered through the crowd of midday shoppers. “I hope the leprechaun has been able to put something meaningful together for us,” she fretted. “You don’t know how I hate to take over someone else’s botched-up investigations.”

“Cheer up,” Mark said brightly, “maybe tomorrow we’ll get lucky and have a lovely new throat slashing all to our very own.”

The lieutenant ignored her partner’s obvious sarcasm. “Did you let the little guy know where we’d be this afternoon?”

“The leprechaun? Unfortunately, yes. He’ll probably turn up in the salad with the midget mushrooms, *and* with a file a mile long.”

The lieutenant chuckled. “Speak of the Devil,” she said.

Waiting for them, by a stack of empty trays, with a bulky bundle of files clutched under one little arm, was Corporal Garfield Leprohn, better known as “the leprechaun” by his colleagues at the Eleventh Precinct. He was Metro’s shortest cop, ever, as well as the legendary head of the Records Department. It was obvious that he had donned his “elevators” for the occasion, which enabled him now to stand at eye-to-eye level with a spiteful little pre-teen girl who had just

jostled him out of his place in line. He was still glaring at her retreating back when the two detectives closed in on him.

Mark beamed at the little cop. "You're in luck," he said with a syrupy smile.

"In luck?" The leprechaun was justifiably wary of Mark, especially when friendly. The big detective had taken an almost obscene delight in needling his pint-sized cohort, at every God-given opportunity.

"You better believe it," Mark said, pointing to a sign over the cafeteria counter. "They've got your special on today." The sign read:

HALF-PORTION SPECIAL FOR TODDLERS
(Must Be Accompanied By An Adult)

"Don't worry about that last bit," Mark told him with mock concern, "we'll vouch for you."

The leprechaun turned to his only friend. "I'll just have a coffee, lieutenant. If you'll be good enough to get it for me, I'll find us a table." Mark thought he spotted a thin curl of smoke rising off the little guy as he stalked away.

"KEEP IT BRIEF, GARFIELD."

The leprechaun took the lieutenant's admonition in stride. His notes and files, much to Mark's annoyance, were everywhere, between coffee cups, soup bowls and plates of salad, and a small pile had been pressed into service (literally) to elevate his tiny tush, so that a level of visibility could be attained above the edge of the table.

"I picked up the Autopsy Report on the way out here," the little man said importantly, "it'll save you a trip to Cadaver City."

"Can't argue with that," the lieutenant acknowledged. "Are there any great pathological revelations in it?"

"Not so's you'd notice, lieutenant. I'll just give you the highlights: Victim, Jake Pedley. Male. Caucasian. Sixty-three. Throat slashed, jugular to carotid (left to right). Murder weapon, sharp knife or razor (not recovered). Time of death, about midnight, Monday, May 2, 1983. And the rest, lieutenant, is just so much bureaucratic, I-hope-this-justifies-my-job gobbledegook."

"Did Sam Morton do that autopsy?"

"Uh — yes. Here it is: Samuel Morton, M.D., Coroner & Chief Medical Examiner, M.C.P.D."

"Mmmm. It's not like Sam to be so sketchy. Not too enlightening, is it?"

"No, it isn't. But then neither is the catch-up material I was able to pry loose from my counterpart in Huntsville." The leprechaun gave an exaggerated sigh of frustration as he opened another file. "But for what it's worth, lieutenant, here it is —

"There were six reported burglaries in the Huntsville area, occurring on seemingly random days (or nights) of the week, except Wednesdays, Saturdays or Sundays. Chronologically, they took place as follows: March 14th, a Monday, Speers; Thursday, March 24th, The Bay Co.; Tuesday, March 29th, P.C. Peter's; then another Speers store on April 4th, a Monday; Friday, April 15th, The Broadwalk; and finally a second P.C. Peter's on Tuesday, April 19th. There doesn't appear to be any pattern to them, except, perhaps, that no store was burglarized more than once, and the Speers' and P.C. Peter's' *chains* were singled out for two burglaries each."

"The chief said something about there not being any signs of forced entry."

"Right." The leprechaun flipped a couple of pages. "The B & E Squad in Huntsville, however, were not overly mystified with the forced entry factor (or the lack of it); they figure he could have easily hidden himself somewhere in the store, prior to closing. It was the lack of forced *exit* that had them baffled. They just couldn't figure out where he went to — *after* making his haul. And they still don't know."

"The stores would have been locked up by then, I presume, and adequately guarded."

"Tight as a drum, lieutenant. There just wasn't any way he could have gotten out without 'breaking a seal,' so to speak."

"But he did."

"Apparently so."

"A regular Houdini," Mark grunted. "What about those so-called rapes?"

"Now there's a dollop of *Ugh!* that defies description." An involuntary shudder shook the leprechaun's little shoulders. "You're already aware, I believe, that the 'rapist' invariably chooses a blonde mannequin on which to vent his venereal aberration (isn't that gross?), but other than that one idiosyncrasy, there doesn't seem to be any pattern to it. All known sex offenders were, of course, rounded up and questioned, but, so far, nothing has come of it."

"And the stolen merchandise, corporal, has any of it been recovered?"

"No. Not yet. Not a single item."

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"After six burglaries?"

"Seven," Mark updated, "if you count the one last night, here in Metro."

"True enough, Mark. Scheee! He must be sitting on a veritable hoard by now." The lieutenant chewed incredulously at her lower lip. "Sooner or later," she mused, "*sometime, somewhere*, he's going to have to start unloading the stuff."

"The Huntsville P.D. have had a special team working on it non-stop, lieutenant, ever since the first heist. Pawnshops, known-fences, you name it. But, to date, they've drawn a blank."

The lieutenant shifted some of the files that were heaped in front of her. "There's a cup of coffee hiding in here somewhere," she lamented, "that *I'm* drawing a blank on. Is all this paper really necessary, Garfield?"

"You cannot create and maintain a record without paper, lieutenant." The leprechaun postured and pouted with appropriate aplomb. "Paper is a vital tool of my trade."

"So why don't you try putting it all on rolls of four-inch tissue," Mark suggested. "Besides taking up less room, it'd be a helluva lot easier to dispose of."

The leprechaun fought to stem the rise of color to his little cheeks. He gathered up his files in stony silence, tossed four-bits on the table to pay for his coffee, and headed for the door without a backward glance.

"The little guy looks a bit 'flushed,'" Mark allowed with impish innocence as he watched the leprechaun trundle away.

THURSDAY, MAY 12TH.

At precisely 9 o'clock in the a.m., Lou Drydon approached the all-glass entrance to The Bay Co. store in Central Metro. He was a tall, rangy man with a florid face and a small, firm, abdominal pot, that came from years of sitting behind the wheel of a car. He carried a large sample case in one hand and a brown leather order book in the other.

Drydon, now in his early fifties, had been a commercial traveler most of his working life. He was presently representing two well-received lines of ladies' wear, both of which had originated in the garment district of New York. They both were specialty lines of *Intimate Apparel*. One, COMFY CONTROL (bras, girdles, corselets, and such), had been designed on the premise that the female form

required some measure of assistance from stretch-nylon and whalebone to look its sexy best. Conversely, the other line, EVE'S RIVAL, assumed all women to be perfect, *au naturel*, and fielded garments that sought simply to adorn and titillate.

It was from this latter line that Lou Drydon chose from his most erotic samples each morning, a pair of panties to wear himself.

Drydon noted with some relief that there was only a smattering of early shoppers in the store. This would give him a clear field to take stock, draw up a fill-in order, and show a few new COMFY CONTROL styles without major interruptions. And that would leave the EVE'S RIVAL line for a similar showing tomorrow morning. Perfect. He went directly to the Lingerie Department where he was known and welcomed with courteous reserve.

"Keep the order to a minimum, Lou," a chunky, barrel-waisted woman called to him from behind a display of what looked like lace-trimmed armor. She was Pamela Jeffers, the manageress, a *corsettiera* of the old school who was obviously well wrapped up in her own advice. He had often speculated, that if the heavily boned garment she always wore under her nylon smock was ever to let go, she'd ooze out over the floor like a hundred and fifty pounds of Gillette Foamy.

"No 34As, and no large sizes, Lou. No smalls or XLs. Only 36s and 38s, B to D cup. Summer's a slow mover, Lou."

"Whatever you say, Miss Jeffers."

Drydon went about taking stock with a seemingly detached indifference, but his eyes strayed repeatedly over to the ladies' outerwear department, where he could just make out, between the racks of colorful summer dresses, the glistening, golden topknot of a blonde mannequin. She was new here, he could tell, even from that distance. He had long ago committed his favorite "girls" in all the stores to memory. The hint of a smile played across his lips. He would have to name her, he thought, as he had the others. Then later, when he had old Miss-Five-by-five off his back, he'd meander over there and have a good look at her. In the meantime, while he worked, he would think of a pretty name

"LIEUTENANT — " MARK STRETCHED THE WORD OUT INTO A weary sigh. They were in the Broadwalk store, on the outskirts of Huntsville, and he was sitting with his beautiful partner at a work-table in the stockroom, behind the lingerie department. "How much longer," he said, "do we have to hang around this cruddy town,

waiting for something to happen?"

"We've only been here since Monday," the lieutenant replied absently, as she watched a frumpy salesgirl search through a myriad of stacked boxes for a garment of a given size and color. "We've managed to do a thorough check of all the burglary sites in Huntsville, Mark, except one, and we should finish that one off some time tomorrow."

"If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all," Mark protested. "Here it is Thursday, lieutenant, and, I ask you, what do we know now that we didn't know last week, before leaving Metro?"

"Not much, I confess. But remember, Mark, the simple process of elimination is, in itself, a proven method of investigation. Besides, we're on a very cold trail."

"This trail is not just cold, lieutenant, it's *frigid* to the point of needing therapy."

Cathy Carruthers admonished him with her eyes as she reached into her handbag for her notebook. "Why must you put everything into a sexual context, Mark? If I didn't know you, I'd have you at the top of my list of suspects." She opened the book and turned a few pages. "Anyhow, let's see what we've got, so far."

"Zilch," Mark told her, "that's what we've got. You're just grabbing at straws, lieutenant."

"Maybe so." She ran a blood-red fingernail down a scribbled page. "But we've got to start somewhere. Look at this, for instance: where I've listed the six burglaries by the days of the week. See? It becomes apparent at once that two occurred on Mondays, and two on Tuesdays, but only one each on a Thursday and a Friday." She looked up at him as though she had just discovered America. "Now, where I've listed them by the 'chain,' rather than by the store, we can see that Speers pops up twice, P.C. Peter's twice, and the other two, only once. Mmmmm —" She squinted thoughtfully at her unresponsive partner as she appeared to consider a third possibility. "But then, by listing them *this* way, Mark, chronologically, by the day and the date — ?"

The lieutenant seemed suddenly to lose herself in her own speculations.

"Well?" Mark grunted impatiently.

"Well," the lieutenant said slowly, "where I've listed them like *that*, it shows that there is precisely three weeks between each of the Monday heists at Speers, and the two Tuesday heists at P.C. Peter's."

"So?"

"So, it suggests to me, Mark, that there are certain 'invariables' here. A kind of regularity. For example: (a), our lascivious felon, for some unknown reason, never rips off more than one store in any given week, (b), he never hits the same store location twice, and, (c), as I've already pointed out, he spaced the Speers jobs and those at P.C. Peter's by exactly three weeks, to the very day —"

Mark made a gun out of his fingers and put it to his right ear. "If I wasn't confused before," he said, "I sure as hell am now." He pulled the trigger. "Goodbye, cruel world," he sobbed.

"You're out of sequence," the lieutenant told him with a patient smile. "You should have said good-bye *before* you pulled the — hey, *that's it!*" she exclaimed suddenly. "Don't you see, Mark? Those first six burglaries have a definite *sequence* to them."

"How about that?"

"Now," she mused as she buried her nose even deeper in the book, "if we can only establish what that sequence is, or the relevance of it, before he has a chance to strike again."

"But he hasn't made a move since the Monday before last," Mark reminded her, "out at the Speers store in Metro. That's almost two weeks ago. Maybe the sight of blood has scared him off."

"Somehow, I doubt that. It didn't seem to dampen his fetishistic ardor on that occasion, did it? But, come to think of it, we just can't be too sure of that either, can we?"

"How so?"

"We're still in the dark on his priorities, Mark. Like who strikes first, the lecher or the yegg?"

Mark held his nose in mock disdain. "Just the same," he admitted grudgingly, "we really don't know how he operates."

"Right. So let's look at another angle. The mannequins."

"Well, for one thing, they've all been blondes," Mark volunteered.

"Yes," the lieutenant added, "and they've all been fully dressed. Sedately dressed, at that."

Mark grimaced. "You mean, to begin with."

"But doesn't that strike you as being somewhat incongruous?"

"And just what," Mark queried, "do you suggest would be congruous to a sex fiend?"

"Still, it could be relevant that he hasn't yet attacked a mannequin that was scantily clad, or nude, or even one that was left overnight by the display people, in a partial state of dishabille. The rapist, Mark, in every case, has been *a fully dressed figure*. That should tell us something."

"It should?"

The lieutenant screwed up her beautiful face in thought. "Of course," she said at last.

"Of course," Mark echoed with a facial shrug of mock accord.

"It is only then, Mark, that those things look for real. Or human, if you like. Don't you see? The least clothing a mannequin has on, the more it looks like just what it damn well is — a cold and sexless plaster dummy."

"What you're saying is that the clothes help to fuel the imagination," Mark acknowledged. "Agreed, but what does it prove?"

"It proves that we've got a genuine psycho on our hands, Mark, with a very real fetish. This bozo probably couldn't relate to a bona fide woman if his life depended on it."

"But what can we do about it? All known sex offenders have already been checked out. Both in Metro, and here in Huntsville. And all we've come up with so far is a goose egg." He gave it a moment's thought. "Unless, of course, the guy is a first-timer."

"A distinct possibility, Mark. Also, there's this business about there being no signs of break-in, or break-out. And when you start putting it all together, it begins to smell like an inside job."

Mark looked doubtful. "Lieutenant, what kind of an 'inside job' is going to give a man access to seven different stores, that are owned and operated by four totally different 'chains'?"

"Hard to say," the lieutenant conceded, "but it's the best angle we've come up with so far."

Mark glanced at his watch. "Hold your fire, lieutenant, it's almost 5:30. Don't you think it's time we called it a day?"

"Indeed, I do, Mark." The lieutenant folded her notebook and stowed it back in her red leather shoulder bag. "We've just got time to get cleaned up."

"We have? For what?"

"Well, Mark, seeing we're being held over for another night, I took the liberty of picking up a couple of tickets to the Huntsville Opera House. Pavarotti is appearing in Puccini's *La Boheme* tonight. It should be pleasurable edifying for you."

Mark groaned. "Being edified is not exactly my idea of pleasure," he muttered. "I don't suppose it would be possible —"

The lieutenant stifled his protest with a bewitching smile. "*La Boheme* is a love story," she told him in a propitious stage whisper, "when the house lights dim, *anything is possible.*"

FRIDAY, MAY 13TH.

When Chief Hank Heller's call came through at 4:15 a.m., Cathy Carruthers was fast asleep in her hotel room. They had chosen a small hotel in the central part of town, more out of convenience than preference. She groped in the dark for the phone, then grunted in the general direction of the mouthpiece.

"Lieutenant? This is Chief Heller."

"Huh? Chief? Good grief, man, d'you know what time it is?"

"I know precisely what time it is, lieutenant. And it affords me the greatest pleasure to jangle your comatose brains at this unholy hour. Unfortunately, the serious nature of my call tends to dilute my equally unholy joy, but only somewhat."

"Give," the lieutenant muttered.

"Romeo has struck again."

"My God," she said. "What this time?"

"You name it, we got it." The chief's voice was quietly, deadly serious. "Rape, burglary, and bloody murder. Not necessarily in that order."

"Where, and who?"

"The Bay Co. in the Pinetree Park Shopping Center. The victim was a woman this time, a Miss Jeffers. Pamela Jeffers. She is (or was) the manageress of the ladies' underwear department, or whatever they call it."

"I doubt they call it that, chief, but what was a woman doing in the store in the middle of the night?"

"She wasn't. I mean, she was, but — "

"But, what?"

"But, well — let me give it to you from the beginning. I got the call about a half hour ago. Our guys were already on the scene. A watchman phoned it in. The M.E., Sam's assistant, pegged the time of death, tentatively, at five to six hours. That would mean she died around 10 or 11 o'clock, last night."

"The store was still open at that hour?" the lieutenant asked incredulously.

"Hell, no. She was apparently working late, taking stock, or something. She must have heard him and gone over to investigate. When they found her, she was over in the dress department with her throat cut from ear to ear."

"Seems I've heard that song before," the lieutenant said softly. "You said something about rape."

"Yeah. Not the woman, though. It was another mannequin, a new one they'd just got into the evening wear section of the dress department. He sure messed up an expensive set of threads."

"Was the mannequin a blonde?"

"What else?"

"Chief." The lieutenant's voice took on a reflective note. "Don't you find that middling strange? Passing up a real woman, I mean, to rape a lousy dummy?"

"Not really, lieutenant. And you won't either, when you see the woman."

"Hmmm." The lieutenant was silent for several moments. "Did he get away with a haul?"

"He had a field day."

"Any weapon?"

"No. He must have taken it with him. We're still searching, of course."

"Anything else you can tell me, chief?"

"Only this. There were no signs of forced entry, or exit. We've checked out every door, window and vent. It's almost like we're dealing with a, a —"

"— a ghost?"

"You said it, I didn't."

The lieutenant laughed. "Okay, we're on our way." She checked the luminous dial of her watch. "We should be there before the store opens at nine. See if you can get the area roped and curtained off where they found her, and *it*. And, chief —?"

"Yeah?"

"Get the Lab Crew in at the scene before anyone touches that corpse or the dummy. This is the first warm bit of evidence we've had a chance to work with."

"Well, you'd better hurry."

"Chief?"

"That 'warm' evidence, lieutenant. She's getting colder by the minute."

MARK OPENED HIS EYES WITH A START, THEN GRINNED AS he recognized who had awakened him.

"Well, lookie here now," he purred, "it's Aunt Cathy with her hair down." He slid over to the far side of the bed and turned down the covers. "Be gentle with me," he pleaded in a feigned, frightened little

voice.

The lieutenant laughed at him, in spite of a supreme effort not to. "Doesn't that lecherous libido of yours ever call it quits?" she scolded.

"Sure, if that's what turns you on," Mark replied agreeably. "So, okay — let's make 'quits.' "

"The only thing you're going to make," the lieutenant told him in a voice that did not in any way reflect her sleepy, sultry appearance, "is tracks. It's time," she said, "to hit the road."

"What's up?"

The lieutenant quickly filled him in on the call from the chief. "We've just got time for a quick shower," she added. "Breakfast will have to wait."

Mark sat up in bed, wide awake. "I don't suppose I could interest you in the merits of conserving both time and water, could I?" He was suddenly at his persuasive best. "The Pure-Water Society of Bald Knob, Arkansas, has proven, positively, that two can shower as quickly and as pleasurable as one — "

The lieutenant picked up the pillow closest to her and threw it. "Five minutes," she asserted. "Dressed and packed."

Mark's garbled rejoinder was (fortunately) muffled by the pillow.

THE AREA IN THE BAY CO.'S DRESS DEPARTMENT WHERE Pamela Jeffers had met her untimely end, was roped and curtained off from public view. A few early morning shoppers milled about the floor, unconcerned with what appeared to be the sequestered, innocent beginnings of a new display. The news of the manageress' death had apparently not yet been leaked to the Media. And for that, the lieutenant was thankful.

"Yuck!" Policewoman Fisk, who had been assigned to guard the area, gave voice to the sentiments of all three of them, as they stood over the chalked outline that now replaced the body. Blood was everywhere, and a disheveled blonde mannequin lay about ten feet away, parallel to the outline. The pristine, gossamer folds of the sequined evening dress it wore, was rumpled and torn — and grossly soiled.

"I see they've dusted the mannequin for prints," the lieutenant said to Fisk, who stood at her elbow. "Do you know if they came up with anything?"

"Nothing but a bunch of smudges." The young brunette rookie was dressed in civies, so as not to attract undue attention. "There wasn't even a decent print from the display staff who dressed her — uh, it."

"Well, at least we know now that we're not dealing with a copy-catter," Mark noted grimly. "There can't be any doubt that this is the work of the same guy."

"Yes, indeed," the lieutenant agreed, "and he seems to be right on cue."

Mark lifted his bushy brows as he fired up a cigarette. "Come again?"

"I'll get to that later, Mark. Right now, I'd like to have a few words with the store management." She turned to the young brunette who, in her summery blouse and skirt, looked like anything but the trained and capable policewoman she was. "Officer Fisk, can you tell me where the Administrative Offices are?"

"Right on this floor, lieutenant." Fisk pointed a dainty finger. "There, behind the Notions Department."

"Thank you. Fisk, you stay here. Mark, while I'm gone, see what you can come up with in the lingerie department. And I don't mean, pink pagans. I'll meet you over there in a few minutes."

"You got it, lieutenant." Officer Fisk acknowledged the order with a weary sigh.

She lifted the rope for them to exit under, then watched Mark thread his way, like a bull in a cornfield, through the racks of summer dresses toward the lingerie department. A well-endowed salesgirl was there to greet him with a questioning smile in front of an elaborate display of "Uplift" bras. Her opulent, cantilevered bosom seemed to be a living testimonial to the advertised claims of the product she was selling, and undoubtedly wearing.

"Is this where Miss Jeffers works?" Mark asked, trying to keep his eyes above the level of the girl's chin.

"Yes, sir. But she's not in this morning."

"Are you aware if she was working last night?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." She gave him a curious look. "She was doing an inventory, I believe. That's probably why she's late getting in this morning. It's really not all that unusual."

From where he stood, Mark could clearly see the curtained-off area he had just vacated, and then, as he glanced to his left, he noticed a tall, gangly-looking man, with a balding pate and a small paunch, busily sorting through the bins of bras and panties that flanked the department on three sides. The man's eyes met his, fleetingly, then quickly flicked away.

"Sir?"

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The girl had moved up close to Mark's elbow and as he turned, his cigarette dangling on his lower lip, he found himself suddenly squeezed into her somewhat generous, head-to-toe proximity.

"We have a 'thank-you-for-not-smoking' policy in the store," she said with a patronizing smile. But then, before Mark could respond, the ash fell off the end of his dangling cigarette and disappeared into the girl's protruding cleavage. She looked calmly down at her offended anatomy, then just as calmly back up to a discomfitted Mark.

"I suspect," she said with irritating sweetness, "*that* is one of the reasons why."

Mark beat a hasty retreat to where the lieutenant now stood waiting, and watching, in the aisle. Her beautiful face was contorted with suppressed amusement.

"That's not exactly what I'd call making a clean breast of things," she choked through muffled laughter, as they headed back together toward the scene of the murder. "I'm just relieved that you didn't try to retrieve it."

"Nuts!" Mark grunted. "It wouldn't have happened if she hadn't been so — "

" — so forward?" the lieutenant suggested with pretended innocence.

IT WAS LATER THAT SAME DAY. CHIEF HANK HELLER'S graven face hovered over his desk like an incipient storm cloud. Cathy Carruthers and Mark Swanson stood in the doorway to his office, as though reluctant to advance any further into so hostile an environment.

"It will be exactly two weeks tomorrow since I put you two on this case," the chief was saying in a tone of voice that augered no good for anyone, least of all the two detectives who now stood before him, "and what do you have to report? You've got a theory. *A theory!* I don't want a theory, lieutenant, I want an arrest."

"Chief, if you'll just hear us out — "

"Lieutenant, the only thing I want to hear is the click of handcuffs on the man who murdered Pedley and Jeffers. Now, understand me, I'm giving you just three more days to come up with something substantial, something I can take to the commissioner. Three more days, lieutenant. Otherwise, you're off the case."

"But, chief — "

"No 'buts,' lieutenant. Just results. Now, if you can find the bloody thing, close the door as you leave."

When the door had closed behind them, the chief smiled knowingly; while outside in the corridor, the lieutenant looked wide-eyed at a thoroughly discombobulated Mark Swanson.

"I just wanted to tell him," she seethed, "that we'd *have* the damn killer for him, Tuesday night."

Mark froze on the last swing of a double-take. "We'll *what*? You've got to be kidding, lieutenant. We're not even close to knowing who that creep is. All I can say is, it's a good thing he didn't give you the chance to stick your pretty neck out any further than it already is."

The lieutenant spun angrily on her heel and headed for the elevators. "If you think that's sticking my neck out, wait'll you hear what I've got in mind."

Mark caught up with her just in time to board the same elevator. There was only one other occupant in the car; a prune-like, precipitously ageing cleaning lady, standing alone and aloof at the rear of the elevator. The woman looked almost triumphant, Mark thought in passing, as though she had devoted her entire forty-odd years to the joyless pursuit of menopause, and had, at that very moment, finally achieved her goal.

"Well?" Mark nudged his beautiful partner. "How long are you going to keep me in suspense?" he asked in a husky whisper.

The lieutenant regarded him with one of those opaque stares that usually denoted some deep, inner cogitation. "We've been going at this all wrong," she whispered back.

The prune raised a spinsterish eyebrow.

"We have?" Mark queried, wondering vaguely why he was whispering.

"Yes. We've been dwelling too much on the murders."

"Yeah, well — "

"And all those rapes."

"But — "

"What we *should* be thinking about, Mark, is — "

The prune-like ear closest to them twitched.

"— *Sex!*" The lieutenant's one whispered word echoed off the walls of the elevator with alarming clarity. "Perverted, maniacal sex," she appended, with somewhat unseemly zeal.

The doors gapped open and Mark turned to allow the matronly person he remembered to be behind him, to exit first. Oddly, she had already left.

MONDAY, MAY 16TH.

Mark was perched on a P.C. Peter's check-out counter, watching while Cathy Carruthers was doing her level best to look like a mannequin, and a prissy little man from the display department, was doing his best to make a mannequin look like Cathy Carruthers. The three of them were alone in the store, except possibly for a member of the security staff who would be somewhere out of sight, checking doors and punching clocks. The time was 11:05 p.m.

Since the store's opening at 9 a.m., the two detectives had spent most of their time with the General Manager, setting up what the lieutenant referred to as her "proposed ambuscade." They had been promised total cooperation, both in the acquisition of props, as well as the direct assistance of certain store personnel that would be necessary to the success of the lieutenant's risky ploy. Other than the G.M., however, and one trusted assistant, there were only two other employees who had knowledge of the scheme; the manageress of the lingerie department, and the little display man. Later, one guard would also be alerted.

The smile Mark now leveled at his comely partner, did not totally hide the concern he felt deep in his gut. It was a dangerous thing she was doing; but to watch her, you would think she was being fitted for a dress to go to the school prom. Her beautiful honey-colored hair was hidden under a tinsel-blonde wig that was styled in identical fashion to the wig on the mannequin. And the lavender dress she had been given to wear, was an elegant twin to the one on her hank-o'-hair counterpart.

"When you said you were going to stick your neck out, you weren't just kidding," Mark said with feeling. "Frankly, I don't like any part of this."

"It's the only way we're ever going to nail him," the lieutenant replied. "Anyway, it's too late now for second thoughts."

"Maybe he won't show," Mark said hopefully.

"Either way, Mark, we're between a rock and a hard place. And if I could have my druthers, I'd still prefer to deal with *El Sexo* than an irate Chief Heller."

"What makes you think this weirdo is going to take the bait, lieutenant?"

The lieutenant sighed soulfully. "I've already told you, Mark, I just don't believe we're after a murderer, *per se*, or even a burglar, or a rapist. The guy we're after is a gold-plated psycho. I believe we're

dealing with a man who, until very recently, had been living a relatively normal life. I also believe he is known, and perhaps even respected, by a lot of people in the stores that he has plundered and desecrated. The actual murders, and the burglaries, in my opinion, are merely 'extensions' of his compelling mania with the mannequins."

"I get the drift," Mark said impatiently, "what you're saying is that we're not about to catch a psycho by looking for a thief or a murderer."

"Right, Mark. And especially a thief who has made no visible attempt to profit from his crimes, or a murderer whose victims seem to be merely chance encounters, and whose deaths are totally bereft of method or motive. No wonder we've drawn a blank. We've been looking in the wrong places for the wrong guy."

"And you're sure this is the right place?"

The lieutenant turned her head and smiled. The combination of the tinsel-blonde wig and her own luminous blue eyes was not only stunning, it was positively magnetic. She was seated at a table in a make-believe nightclub. A third mannequin, a male, in black-tie and tails, sat opposite. The table was grandly accoutered and graced with a bottle of rare wine, crystal glasswear, and a flickering candle centerpiece that almost looked like the real article:

"Only time will tell, Mark," she said around the fussing of the little display man. "But now we're into assumptions, rather than hard-nose facts. We have to assume that, *one*, these 'rapes' (I deplore that reference) are intentionally, or *unintentionally*, a sequence, and, *two*, that he's repeating the same sequence here in Metro that he began in Huntsville."

"But there's another P.C. Peter's store in Metro, lieutenant, out in Almond Gardens."

"Yes, I know. And that's a chance we'll have to take. My guess is, though, that he'll stay in this area. It would be more consistent with his previous pattern."

"*Fudge!*" The somewhat mild expletive was delivered with the flip of a delicate hand on the end of a limp wrist. Dickie Wilde, of the display department, was obviously annoyed. "Oh, I *did* ask you girls to stay still. Dearie me. I'll just *never* get you dressed at this rate."

Dickie Wilde took the lieutenant's head gently between his little hands and turned it back to where it had been. He fussed over her dress, molding the low-cut bodice to her breasts, and arranging a casual fall to the material over her generously exposed thighs. A

disapproving frown had clouded Mark's stolid features. Few men would risk doing what the innocuous Dickie Wilde was innocently getting away with.

To break the tension in his own demeanor, Mark said lightly, "What are you going to do 'bout matching up *their* eyes, Dickie?"

"Oh, yes," he lisped, just inches from the lieutenant's livid blue orbs, "aren't they just *darling*?"

He took a small bottle from the make-up kit with which he had been attempting to transform the mannequin into a Cathy Carruther's look-alike. "It's a luminous blue dye, of sorts," he said with a dither of excitement. "It's my *own* innovation."

The little man applied the dye to the mannequin's somewhat vapid blue irises. The result was startling.

"There," he beamed. He assumed a typical Jack Benny pose, with hands on hip and cheek, waiting for his kudos. Mark obligingly applauded, as much to cover his own amusement as in honest praise. The lieutenant rose and turned to have a look. "Oh, wow," she breathed. "Do I look like that?"

"I'll finish this off myself now, if you *don't* mind," Dickie Wilde told them with a note of petulant authority. "I'll have the *real* mannequin in the display during the day, of course, then at *closing* time, I'll be here to make the switch. She'll need some last minute *preening*, you see," he said, as he fussed and plucked at the material in the lieutenant's dress. "I'll spruce this up for you tomorrow, sweet, so if you'll *just* slip it off — *Oh!*" he tittered, with a smirking glance at Mark, "we have a gentleman present, don't we? You'd better use the change room, dear."

Mark's eyes were saucers of incredulity as his beautiful partner, in a fit of restrained laughter, trooped off to the change room.

"They're such *dears*," Dickie Wilde confided to Mark, as he turned his attention back to the mannequin, "but they do so *try* a person, don't they?"

TUESDAY, MAY 17TH.

Lou Drydon crossed the parking lot of P.C. Peter's Pinetree Park store in a state of inner excitement. He glanced at his watch as he neared the entrance. Nine-thirty. He was in good time. The girls, of course, would already be there, waiting for him, standing serenely in their places, posing in their pretty clothes. He smiled wanly. Before the day was much older, he would be choosing among them for one to

be his lover.

He hurried through the entrance foyer, feeling the first cool puff of the air-conditioning, then plodded down the wide center aisle toward the lingerie department. His sample case hung heavily from his right hand and, midway along the aisle, he decided arbitrarily on a detour through the dress department to shorten his trek. And it was there and then, as he circled a heavily laden rack of multi-colored summer dresses, that he saw her for the first time.

She sat at a table with a man in black-tie and tails, *but her liquid, shimmering blue eyes were looking directly at him.* There was a half-consumed bottle of wine on the table, an array of sparkling crystal, and a dancing yellow candle that imbued the whole tableau with an aura of sheer elegance. But it was the girl in the lavender dress that swelled his heart, the girl with the golden hair and the most exquisite, heavenly-blue eyes he had ever seen.

He continued on to the lingerie department, reluctant to leave his new love, but ecstatic in the knowledge that he had found her so quickly. He'd have the whole day now to think about her, to fantasize, to dream up a pretty and appropriate name. He'd have to schedule his day just right, so that he would still be working in the department at closing time, ready to slip away, to lose himself in the stockroom; *just as he had done in so many stores, so many times before.*

He went happily about his task, counting bras and panties, negligees and nighties, with the image of his new-found love dancing sensuously in his thoughts.

WHEN THE LAST CUSTOMER HAD FINALLY STRAGGLED FROM the store, it was precisely 5:37, and Cathy Carruthers slipped silently out of the fitting room, dressed in her blonde and lavender ensemble. Dickie Wilde, she saw, had already denuded her mannequin look-alike and was deftly tugging a chalk-white tennis outfit over its bald head. She watched him fuss with the dummy like a mother hen, then cart it off to a spot opposite Sporting Goods, where he stuck a racquet in its hand and endowed it with a page-boy hair-do and an instant back-hand.

When Dickie returned to the display, the lieutenant was already settled in the seat the mannequin had vacated. "Now," he whispered, "let's get you presentable — *Oh my!* What is this lumpy *thing* you've got under that pretty dress?"

The lieutenant gently open-handed him back a pace. "Wait," she

whispered hoarsely. She took the earplug from the top of the battery unit that was strapped between her breasts and lodged it firmly in her left ear. From her purse, that she had slipped in under the floor-length table cover, she withdrew her own original Smith & Wesson .38 Special, and tucked it snugly between her crossed thighs. "Now fix me up," she told him curtly, "and remember that we're here to catch a murderer, not to win the Miss America title."

Dickie Wilde swallowed noisily, with a nervous forward thrust of his chin. He suddenly seemed to see his assigned task in an entirely new light. With his busy little fingers, he hid the wire from the earplug beneath the cascading blonde tresses of the wig. The offending bulge between her breasts, he skillfully obscured by re-arranging the loose, lavender folds of her dress. And the gun that protruded so evilly from between her thighs, he cleverly concealed under a seemingly innocent bunching of her raised skirt.

As the little man fussed over her, the lieutenant pressed a button on the battery unit. "Mark? Do you read me? Come in, Mark." Her voice, to Dickie Wilde, was almost inaudible. The voice that answered, he didn't hear at all.

"I read you, lieutenant. Everything okay?"

"So far, so good. Dickie's preening me."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Tell the little fag to hurry up and get out of there."

To Dickie Wilde, the lieutenant said, "I think you'd better leave now."

The little guy needed no more prompting. He picked up the wig and the dress he had stripped from the mannequin, took one last critical look at his "display" and beat a hasty retreat.

The lieutenant was suddenly very much alone. It was just a few minutes shy of six o'clock, and still light outside (and would be, until well after nine) but without the overhead lights, the interior of the store was dingy with shadow and as silent as a tomb. Even her companion at the table, so quiet and unmoving, took on the unreal, spectral quality of an unwanted presence.

Cathy Carruthers tried to think of other things while the minutes began to tick by with painful slowness.

BACK IN THE POLICE VAN THAT WAS PARKED JUST BEYOND and to one side of the north entrance, Mark was monitoring the radio that was tuned in to the set on the lieutenant's chest. The reception was excellent. He could hear it when she breathed deeply, or sharply,

and her occasional nervous swallow was clearly audible. Officer Too-Tall Bones sat beside him, his black face creased with concern.

Mark glanced at his watch. The second hand was just moving up to 7:35. He had been making contact with her every five minutes for the past two hours. He switched on the mike.

"Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Mark."

"You okay?"

"I guess. I never thought sitting still could be so painful."

"Have you heard anything?"

"Not since the watchman made his rounds. All I've heard since, is silence."

"You can't *hear* silence."

"Want to bet?"

"Okay, pardner, just want you to know we're with you, every second."

"That's good to know."

"Over and out."

The speaker in the van picked up the lieutenant's weary sigh of resignation.

"I'd feel better," Too-Tall said, "if we were hidden inside the building somewhere. The way it is, it's going to take us at least two minutes to get to her."

"You think I don't know that?" Mark said grimly. "But how can we hide from someone who's already hidden, and we don't know where? All we'd do is scare him off."

"If he's in there to begin with."

"So how else d'you figure he gets in there without cracking a door or a window?"

"Beats me." Too-Tall was silent for several moments. "Are you sure the guard has left the door open for us?"

"No, I'm not sure, Bones," Mark said impatiently, "but the guy did get his instructions. He was also told to clear the area, and keep it clear, until we sound the all-clear." He chuckled dryly. "He was only too happy to oblige."

"I still wish there was some way we could check out that door," Too-Tall worried.

"Well, there isn't. Damn it, Bones, you're acting like an old woman."

"Yeah, I guess," the big black said lamely. "It's just that she's so

alone in there, and so bloody vulnerable."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Bones put a gigantic black hand on the big detective's shoulder. "Sorry, sarge. Let's just be ready to roll if anything happens."

"I'm ready," Mark muttered softly.

LOU DRYDON LIFTED HIS WRIST AND STUDIED THE DIAL ON his digital watch. It was 9:41. There hadn't been a sound since the guard had passed through more than three hours before. He was stretched out on his back on the uppermost shelf in the stockroom, his jacket rolled up under his head like a pillow, and his sample case resting just beyond his feet. He was not uncomfortable. On the contrary; later, when it was all over, he'd simply come back up here and wait until the store re-opened in the morning. Then he would pick his moment to blend unobtrusively back in among the lingerie displays. He would be expected (welcomed, even) with his second line, "Eve's Rival." In the meantime, he'd idle away the hours, as he'd always done, thinking about his past encounters.

It was then, his heart took an unexpected, anxious leap, as, suddenly, he recalled that one time, about two weeks ago, when he had looked up to see the watchman standing over him, *just standing there, watching him with the girl* — And then, again, last Thursday, that damn woman. *She had just stood there, with her fat ugly mouth open, looking down at them.* That was the night he had been with Marlene, he remembered. The recollection made him groan inwardly. He'd just have to be extra cautious, that's all. Especially tonight. His girl, tonight, was really someone quite special.

He rolled over on his side, reaching down with one foot to get a toe-hold on a lower shelf. His descent was rapid and soundless; he had done it many times before. With his sample case tucked under one arm (to prevent it rattling at the handle), he headed for the door.

The interior of the store was now a haven of ever-lengthening shadows. He paused beside a circular rack of negligees and nighties and waited, listening, before crossing the open aisle into the Dress Department. And then (determined not to be caught unaware again), he drew the switch-blade from his pocket and with a dull *click*, he released the razor-like shiv from its scabbard.

THE FIRST INKLING THE LIEUTENANT HAD THAT SHE WAS NO longer alone in the store, was a faint, almost imperceptible *click* that

seemed to originate from behind a circular rack across the aisle. Then, a vague blur of movement silently came and went in her peripheral vision. The muscles in her arms and legs, already cramped from their prolonged immobility, tightened with painful apprehension, and the hair at the nape of her neck lifted in a cold sweat. The urge to turn her head in that direction was overpowering.

"Lieutenant? You all right? What's up?" Her quickening breath had betrayed her sudden alarm to the men in the van.

"Something," she breathed, "someone — "

"Can you see him?"

"No, but — "

"How close is he?"

"Thirty feet?" Her lips were frozen into a fixed position, slightly parted, so that the "f" in feet came out slurred and indistinct.

"Let me know the second you see — "

"It's him." The whispered words were pressed out of shape against the roof of her mouth. She wondered if they could understand her. "He's coming — knife — "

There was suddenly no response from the radio, only a flat silence. "Mark," she hissed, "it's him — "

The man was clearly visible to her now, tall and disheveled looking, no more than twenty feet away, moving closer. She fought to quiet her breathing, to keep it at an indiscernible level, but her quickening senses had sent the adrenaline pulsing through her body in a burgeoning, irrepressible wave. And then, when he stood, at last, directly in front of her, gazing wildly into her own wide blue eyes, she blinked.

His first reaction, she saw, was fear. Then, disbelief. Finally, there was a slow dawning of comprehension. He was no more than an arm's length away when she saw the knife again. He held it authoritatively, in an underhand grip, waist high, moving it menacingly side to side.

She was suddenly, coldly calm. All pretense gone now, she waited, watching his eyes for a sign that would telegraph his first move. When it finally came, she threw herself away from the table with all the strength she could summon, groping under her skirt for the gun, meaning to swing around as she landed, to face him again in a half crouch. But her legs, stiff and numb from long inaction, folded under her shifting weight, and she felt the point of the knife trace a searing arc across the inside of her right thigh. Her gun tumbled from nerve-deadened fingers that could not hold onto it.

The lieutenant felt, rather than heard, a rhythmic pounding she

thought at first to be the drumming of her own heart. But a moment later, Mark's galloping size twelves left the floor and his rugged frame went soaring over her head like a Kamikaze WW II Zero. Her attacker saw the human missile coming and made an effort to dodge it, but the big detective's heavy shoulder caught him a glancing blow and he staggered back. Mark went hurtling on into a rack of ankle-length evening dresses, knocking the whole conglomeration to the floor.

The would-be rapist struggled to remain on his feet. The knife was still clutched in his right fist, the tip of it stained red with the lieutenant's blood. He turned on Mark who was on his back, frantically yanking at the tangle of dresses that had fallen around him. He saw Drydon coming, and he doubled up his long legs to take the impact.

The lieutenant had not moved. Her leg was bleeding profusely from the slash of the knife and she groped for the artery on the inside of her thigh. She saw the rapist stagger, then turn and launch a diving charge at Mark, and she yelled a belated warning. But in the next instant, she saw Drydon's gangly body shoot straight up toward the ceiling, a good ten feet into the air, as Mark's powerful legs pistoned him upwards like a giant rag doll. The knife swooping down in a vicious arc, seemed to miss Mark's throat by inches. And as the man dutifully answered the call of gravity, Mark slid to one side and slammed a fist the size of a leg of mutton into the rapidly descending face. Drydon landed hard, twitched once, and lay still.

"Amen," said a giant black shadow that had suddenly appeared behind the lieutenant. "I've triggered the alarm," Bones told them in a voice that sounded like a welcome roll of distant thunder. "This place will be swarming in about two minutes."

"WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN TO OUR BUSY PHALLIC thief, lieutenant?"

"That's *ithyphallic*, Mark," the lieutenant censured him demurely, "which isn't quite the same thing." She was seated behind her desk with her right leg propped up on a half-open drawer. The leg was splinted and mummy-wrapped in white bandages.

"But as for Drydon," she said, "whatever he does draw in the way of a sentence, he'll be out in half that time to rape and murder again, thanks to our current crop of 'enlightened' do-gooders. Meanwhile, it'll cost the taxpayer about fifty-thousand a year to keep his sick brain alive."

"And if he pleads insanity," Mark speculated, "he'll end up in

clover, out at one of those funny farms."

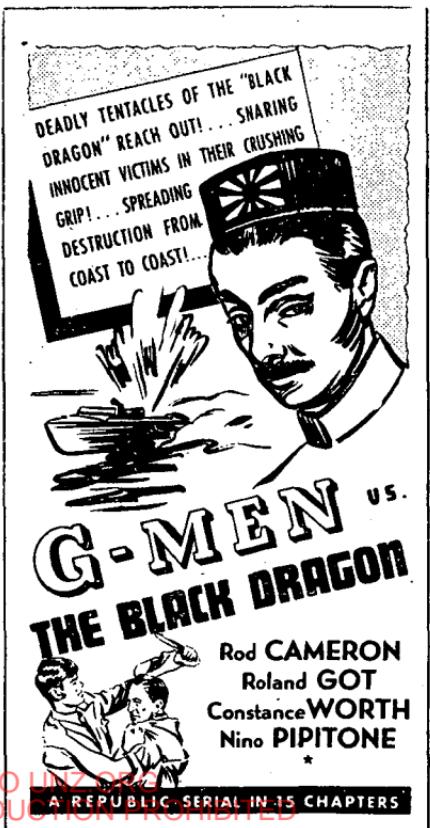
"Whatever." The lieutenant winced as she tried to shift the position of her bandaged leg. "But he's not about to be going anywhere, for awhile, until he gets out of the hospital. You broke his face, you big lug."

"I should have broken his ithyphallic while I was at it," Mark muttered.

Cathy Carruthers returned her partner's Machiavellian grin with a wan little smile. "Mark, I honestly think you should be belled, and X-rated, for the public good." She shook her golden head in a gesture of utter hopelessness.

"Does that mean now that I don't get to help you change the bandages?"

"Dreamer," she chuckled.



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A comic once said, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean no one is out to get you." The line didn't make Dr. Bradford smile. He knew that someone was out to get him — and he was terrified!

PARANOIA

by AL NUSSBAUM

DR. LOUIS BRADFORD WAS A HANDSOME AND URBANE MAN whose thick black hair was touched with gray at the temples. He had both wealth and education and one might have expected him to exude self-confidence; however, he cowered at every loud noise or sudden movement. Death could come from any direction, and anyone might have been hired to deliver it. His constantly shifting eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

In the city, he had feared the darkened doorways he had to pass on the way to and from his apartment. Now that he had moved to the country, he suspected every tree of concealing an assassin. He was paranoid, of course; but, as a comic once said, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean no one is out to get you."

Dr. Bradford was familiar with the quotation, but it didn't make him smile. He didn't need a comic's one-liner to know his fears could have their roots in reality. He had a collection of threatening letters and the memory of countless angry telephone calls. All attested to the fact that he was hated. So did the fact that no one would sell him malpractice insurance anymore. There had been too many suits for damages, and his previous insurance carriers had always been forced to pay the crippled or disfigured plaintiffs.

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This didn't seem fair to Dr. Bradford. After all, he was a licensed physician, a member in good standing of the A.M.A., and he had done nothing illegal. It may have been unethical for him to call himself a plastic surgeon without special training in the field, but it was *not* illegal. He was a licensed M.D. and that was all that was required.

There had been plenty of books covering the techniques of plastic surgery. All he had had to do was begin with some of the more basic procedures and slowly work up to the delicate ones. He wasn't the first doctor who tried to perfect his craft after completing his internship. His license was to *practice*, not *cure*, and that's exactly what he had done.

But he had been the victim of monumental bad luck. During his very first operation, the scalpel had sliced a bit too deeply, cutting nerves as well as tissue. The woman had been left with half her face paralyzed. After that, it seemed as though nothing had gone right.

THAT IS, OF COURSE, AN EXAGGERATION. MOST OF HIS OPERATIONS had proceeded without incident, and even the ones with unhappy results for the patients had not caused him much of a problem. His fees were always collected in advance, and he doubted he could be held liable for less than optimum success. Everyone knew there were risks in every operation. And God knows he always did his best. Was it his fault if, sometimes, his best just wasn't good enough?

The Morgan case was a good example. William Morgan, a man in his late twenties, had come to Dr. Bradford after an automobile accident. He had been left with a few small facial scars and a stiff knee. He wanted the doctor to remove the scars and bring flexibility back to the knee.

The doctor had told Morgan, quite honestly, that scars cannot be removed, but he could make them smaller and less noticeable. The knee damage would present no great challenge, either. A few inches of silver wire, tying the cartilage in place, and the knee would be as good as new.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way it had turned out. Morgan had been a man with dark good looks even with the tiny scars from the accident. He had been filled with humor and had a ready smile. But when the bandages were removed, he looked more like a monkey than a man, and he never smiled again.

The operation on his knee went just as badly. Both the knee and the spot where the spinal anesthetic had been administered became infected with devastating results. When he left the hospital after many

painful months, he was able to walk only with great effort. His back was permanently curved and twisted so that he seemed to both lean and turn at the same time. When he moved, his right leg had to be pulled forward with its heel scraping the ground.

Bill Morgan brought suit immediately. The publicity forced Dr. Bradford to move his practice to another county. No one who saw Morgan's photo in the newspaper or watched his painful progress up the courthouse steps on TV would ever allow the doctor to operate on him. And then, too, that is when the threats began. The consensus of the letters and calls was that any man who could do what he had done to Bill Morgan had forfeited his right to life.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Morgan won his suit. The jury awarded him two million dollars in damages. Bradford's other disgruntled patients had been waiting for that decision. Most of them had, like Morgan, been operated upon in the doctor's office under less than sanitary conditions. It came out in court that Bradford operated in his office so that he didn't have to share fees and because he didn't have hospital privileges at any local institution.

Bradford wasn't about to let a little bad luck turn him from his course. His plastic surgery practice was far more lucrative than any other he could imagine. Instead of slowing up and letting the rage directed at him die down, he accepted more patients and performed more operations than before.

ONE NOON BRADFORD LEFT HIS OFFICE FOR LUNCH AND found Morgan waiting for him on the sidewalk. It was embarrassing. The cripple's twisted body was held erect by a single aluminum crutch, and he dragged himself toward Bradford with the heel-scraping motion the doctor had come to loathe.

"After you lost the court decision and could no longer get insurance, I thought you'd stop," Morgan said. "Now I realize you'll be hurting people as long as you live. I can't allow that."

"Can't allow that?" Bradford echoed. "You have nothing to say about it."

Morgan continued as though Bradford hadn't spoken. "I didn't want money for this." He indicated his face and twisted back with his free hand. "I just wanted you to stop. I didn't want anyone else hurt because of your incompetence. But I have the money now, and I'll use it to stop you. I'd rather kill you myself, but I don't mind hiring someone to do it for me."

Three days later there was an attempt on Bradford's life. He was crossing the street when a speeding car missed hitting him by inches. If he hadn't heard the roar of its engine and dived for the sidewalk, he'd have been killed for sure. Bystanders said it was strange how the car had picked up speed as it came, and how the driver appeared to steer directly at the doctor. Bradford didn't find it strange — he found it frightening.

A few days later a pair of muggers tried to push him into the mouth of a dark alley. Bradford had been on his college track team and the training hadn't been totally forgotten. He ran for his life with adrenalin and panic propelling his feet. The muggers — if that's all they were — gave up the chase after two blocks, but Bradford ran until his side hurt and he had to stop to vomit.

BRADFORD HAD ALWAYS BEEN A PHYSICAL COWARD. HE could handle pain and suffering only as long as it wasn't his own. The thought of having his body smashed and hurt made him ill. Now he wasn't merely frightened — he was terrified.

He looked for danger everywhere. It might come from anyone — a new patient, someone driving past, or a fellow pedestrian. His hands shook too badly to light his cigarettes let alone operate. When he heard a car backfire — it sounded like a backfire — and a piece of a brick building broke off near his head, he didn't stop running until he reached the police precinct house.

Bradford told them his life was in danger. "A madman wants me dead!" he shouted.

The police listened politely at first; but the more he talked, the more they learned about Bradford. His story wasn't one designed to elicit sympathy, though he thought it should. They turned from friendly to cold and explained that, "The man you crippled may not be trying to have you killed. Everything you described could be the result of coincidence."

Bradford did what came naturally to him. He ran. He abandoned his apartment and his practice, changed his name, and fled to a rural area. He was sure no one had been able to follow him, but he hid in his small house for weeks. When he finally ventured as far as the general store, he found himself examining the red-and-white tile floor for the tell-tale black marks of someone dragging a heel. He found none.

That was months ago. Since moving from the city, no further attempts had been made on his life. He was getting restless. Maybe

he had been running from shadows. Perhaps it was time he thought about starting up his practice again.

Now, lying in bed in the dark, he wondered what had awakened him. Could it have been the click of a cocking revolver?

He recognized that for paranoia as soon as the thought took shape in his mind. He listened carefully. There were only familiar sounds — the breeze from the open French doors rustling the drapes; the chirp of a cricket; the hoot of a distant owl; the scrape of a heel

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The mystery of the money-filled briefcase intrigued Cardula. Here was a case he could get his teeth into!

Cardula and the Briefcase

by JACK RITCHIE

MY NIGHT HOURS BRING ME A GREAT MANY CLIENTS WHO, for one reason or another, dare not go to the police for help.

After I assured Alvin Atkins that anything he might tell me was utterly confidential — though I would have refused to cross my heart if he had asked me to do so — he came to the point.

“Mr. Cardula, I am a thief. And so is — or maybe was — Charley Whittle.”

I nodded to indicate that I had successfully survived his revelation.

“Charley and me are partners and been that way for about three years. I met him in Waupon and we both got paroled at about the same time.”

He hitched his chair closer. “We usually operate at around nine in the evening and mostly apartments. At that time of day, if people aren’t home, they’re probably making a night of it and shouldn’t be back for a couple of hours.”

"Well, last night we were in this apartment building on the east side — one of those posh three-story places. We let ourselves in apartment 31, which is on the top floor, and turned on the lights. It was a real classy place, big rooms, and even a cathedral-type ceiling in the living room — or maybe you'd call it the drawing room. Anyway, I grabbed an electric typewriter from the den and carried it down to the car which we had parked in the lot behind the building. I used the fire stairs and propped open the exit door so that I could get back in that way."

"Going back for more loot, I was a little surprised not to meet Charley coming down carrying something. And when I got to the apartment door again, I found that it opened only an inch because it was on the chain. So I said, 'Hey, Charley, why is the chain on the door?' But Charley doesn't come to unhook it. Instead he says real fast, 'He's got me, Al. He's got a gun and he's going to call the cops.' And then there's a thud and a groan."

"I figure what happened was that the owner of the apartment must have been somewhere in there — probably asleep — and he woke up when we let ourselves in and went looking for his gun. It was just my good luck that I happened to be downstairs when he found it."

"Well, there's nothing I can do for Charley, especially if this guy's got a gun, because I don't carry one myself. So I don't wait around to hear any more. I race down to the car and speed away fast."

"And I'm not worried about what Charley might tell the cops, because he wouldn't rat on me any more than I'd rat on him."

"The next day — which is today — I buy a newspaper to see what's being said about Charley, but there's not one word."

"Now I wouldn't expect to see anything in the papers just because a typewriter is missing, but if the police picked up Charley in somebody's apartment, that's big enough to mention, isn't it? But nothing."

He paused for a few moments of thought. "Finally I come up with the answer. When Charley gave me the warning, the apartment owner got nasty and slugged him. Probably with the gun."

"But he hit Charley *too* hard. So there he was with Charley dead and so he changed his mind about calling the cops. They might want to know why he had to hit Charley so hard when he already had him covered with a gun. He could get into a lot of trouble. Bad publicity, if nothing else. Or maybe he's got another reason. So he decides that he'll have to get rid of Charley's body himself, and that ought to be the

end of it. He figures that if Charley disappears, his partner would be the last person to go to the police, and he's right."

"I thought about that all day and finally I decided that something had to be done about it. I was going to go to a private detective tomorrow, but when I looked in the phone book for an address I saw that you got night hours. Only. So I came right over."

It was now nearly eleven p.m.

Atkins now wound it up. "Maybe he's still got Charley's body in the apartment, maybe not. The point is that I don't want him to get away with murder if anything can be done about it."

Atkins gave me a phone number where he could be reached, a snapshot of Charley, and the address of the apartment building where Charley had disappeared.

AFTER ATKINS LEFT, I WENT RIGHT TO WORK. I DECIDED against using my car. After all, it was a balmy night with no threat of rain and a favorable tail wind. Besides, I needed the exercise.

I arrived at my destination in less than ten minutes, using my ring of special keys and picks to enter the security-conscious building. In the foyer, I found that mail box number 31 belonged to an H.C. Jefferson.

At the door of apartment 31, I listened, but did not hear any sounds, TV or otherwise. I pressed the buzzer several times and waited a full five minutes. No one came to the door.

Was H.C. Jefferson playing possum again? Would he be waiting on the other side of the door with a gun? Would he fire at me point-blank and ruin a perfectly good suit? It was a chance I had to take.

I let myself into the apartment and turned on the lights. First I made a thorough search of the apartment, including the closets, and I even looked under the bed. I found neither H.C. Jefferson nor any trace of Charley. I then searched for blood stains — a pursuit for which I have a talent — but I found none.

The telephone rang.

I let it ring five times and then succumbed to temptation. I picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

A man's voice answered. "Is this H.C. Jefferson?"

I decided to go along with that. "Yes. Who is calling?"

"Never mind. Are you missing anything?"

I gave that a moment's thought. "Maybe a typewriter?"

He chuckled. "Anything else?"

"Maybe."

"How about \$200,000 in one hundred dollar bills? When I opened that little briefcase and looked at all that money, it sort of went to my head. It even broke up a beautiful friendship."

I frowned as a suspicion formed in my mind. Was I talking to Charley Whittle? While his partner had been carrying the typewriter down to the car, had Charley found the money and decided it was too much to share with his partner? Had he quickly put the chain on the door and then put on his little act, knowing that Atkins would flee from the scene as swiftly as possible? "Why are you calling me now?"

"When I left your place I checked in at a hotel just so I'd have a place to count the money and I did. About \$200,000. I thought I'd struck it rich."

I picked up the significant word. "Thought?"

"That's right. Then I looked at that money again. More careful this time. And I see they are all *new* one hundred dollar bills. So I get to thinking. Who would leave \$200,000, just lying around like that?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"I was going to take a plane out of town, but then I decided to stick around another day and see what's in the newspapers about \$200,000 being stolen. But there's nothing. Not one word. So I come to a conclusion. The bills are counterfeit."

I wisely said nothing.

"If I tried spending them, I'd probably get picked up. Passing counterfeit money isn't my trade. I thought that over all day, and finally I see some light. And profit. The bills mean nothing to me, but I think they mean something to you. If you didn't print them yourself, you have to buy them from somebody. And maybe they cost you?"

"Possibly."

He chuckled again. "I went back to your apartment building a little while ago and got your name off the mail box. Then I looked it up in the phone book and here I am. I could let you have the bills back for ten thousand dollars. In *real* money."

"Suppose they aren't worth that much to me?"

"Look, I'm really doing you a big favor. I could easily ship the bills to the police with a note telling them where I found the funny money. That might not be enough to pin it on you, but they'd at least be watching you for a while. And that could put a crimp on your operations."

"In other words, you're really blackmailing me?"

"Well, that too. \$10,000 is my price. Meet me at the magazine rack in the bus station downtown at twelve noon tomorrow."

"I can't. I have a severe case of heliophobia. Suppose I meet you there in about an hour. It'll take me that long to raise the cash."

Charley thought that over and decided it would do.

AFTER HE HUNG UP, I SAT DOWN TO THINK. MY MUSINGS were interrupted by the sound of a key being used on the apartment door lock. I quickly adjourned to the shadows of the cathedral ceiling.

A few moments later, a striking young woman entered the room carrying two suitcases. She put them down and sank into a chair with the general relief of someone who has just returned from a long journey and is thankful to be home.

Her hair was raven black, her skin quite arrestingly pale, and she had lustrous black eyes. Exactly my type of woman, and for a moment I even wondered if she might not actually be one of But no, I could see her image reflected quite clearly in one of the room's mirrors.

I studied the suitcases. Perhaps they explained why the robbery had not been reported to the police. H.C. Jefferson had been away on a trip. Did this mean that the money might be genuine after all?

Suddenly she frowned and sat up, staring past the open door of the den. She rose to her feet and entered the room, coming back out in a matter of moments. She had obviously discovered that her electric typewriter had been stolen.

She went directly into an adjoining bedroom. From my point of vantage, I could see her open the top drawer of a dresser. It was evident that she did not find what she was looking for. Her lips moved in a silent, emphatic oath, and she reached for the bedside phone.

Was she calling the police? I quickly descended and picked up the extension in the drawing room.

I heard the rings and then the phone was picked up and a man answered.

"Ernie," she said. "This is Helen. I just got home."

"How was the trip?"

"Pretty good. I got rid of about a hundred thousand." She paused. "Ernie, while I was gone somebody got into my apartment and stole my electric typewriter."

He sounded sympathetic. "I read someplace that one out of three households gets ripped off every year."

"The typewriter isn't the only thing missing."

"Oh?"

"I had two hundred thousand in a briefcase. That's gone too."

He sighed. "I told you not to leave that stuff lying around like that, Helen. You should keep it in a safety deposit box."

"I know. But it's too late to cry about that now. Whoever stole the bills is going to use them. He's bound to get picked up and he'll probably tell the police where he got them. What do I do now?"

"Just sit tight. If the cops talk to you, play it innocent all the way. You haven't the slightest idea what they're talking about. It's your word against his and yours should be a lot better. I suppose you'll want another batch of bills?"

"Another two hundred thousand. At the same rate?"

"Right. But don't keep them in your apartment anymore."

When she hung up, I managed to sneak down the hallway to the door and let myself out of the apartment.

I MADE MY WAY TO THE BUS DEPOT, BUT FOUND NO TRACE of Charley in the building itself. However when I traversed the area outside, I located him in a little square across the street. He sat on a bench in the shadows of a large shrub where he had a clear view of the bus terminal and its magazine rack. His right hand clutched a briefcase.

I quickly descended upon him, grasping him by the back of the neck and rendering him instantly unconscious. He would remain in that condition for approximately half an hour.

I checked the briefcase and found the counterfeit bills inside. Beside me, the limp and still unconscious Charley slid off the bench and struck his head upon the sidewalk. I immediately examined him and was relieved to find that he was not seriously injured, though a bump was beginning to form on his forehead.

I took the briefcase with me when I entered the bus station and went to a public phone. I dialed Atkins' number.

When he answered, I said, "I found Charley."

"That was quick work. Alive or dead?"

"Alive."

"What has he got to say about all of this?"

"I haven't spoken to him yet. I thought you might want to do that yourself."

"You bet. Where do I find him?"

"In the small square across the street from the downtown bus depot.

You'll find him lying behind the bench closest to the statue of Solomon Juneau."

"What the hell is he doing there?"

"You might say he's sleeping it off."

"I'll be right there."

I WENT BACK TO THE SQUARE AND THOUGHT THE SITUATION over. What would Atkins have to say to Charley? Better yet, what would Charley have to say to Atkins? I decided not to interfere with the momentous reunion. When I saw Atkins enter the square, I faded back into the bushes where I could still see and hear.

Charley regained consciousness just as Atkins found him. He sat up and blinked. His eyes quickly searched the ground about him, but, of course, the briefcase was gone.

Atkins stared down at him. "Well?"

Charley touched his head, discovered the bump, and groaned.

Atkins tried again. "What happened?"

Charley licked his lips. "It's all coming back to me, Al. Slowly. I'm beginning to remember."

"Remember what?"

"There was this guy. In the apartment. This real *big* guy and he suddenly popped out of nowhere and pointed a gun at me. And all I could think of is warning you, my partner, which I did. And then he swings this big gun and hits me right on the head and everything goes black."

"How come the cops haven't got you?"

"Well, I wasn't unconscious for long, Al. Just a few seconds. And so when I came to, I managed to get up and escape."

"Why didn't you show up at the hotel?"

"That's just it, Al. I don't know who I am or where I am. I got amnesia. The worst kind. I don't remember nothing at all."

"Why didn't you look at your driver's license?"

"I did that, Al. But the name didn't help any and the address was Green Bay, where I now remember I got my driver's license. I was just about to catch a bus to Green Bay to see familiar things and get my memory back."

"Then what are you doing sitting here on the grass?"

Charley wrestled with that for a moment. "I suddenly got faint and passed out. I guess that's a reaction to amnesia, Al. But now I'm conscious and got my memory back."

Atkins frowned thoughtfully. "Why didn't any of this get into the papers, Charley? I mean about somebody catching you red-handed in his apartment and trying to hold you for the police?"

"Al, like I said, he was a real big guy. Two hundred and fifty pounds, at least. And I guess he was ashamed that he let somebody as little as me get away from him and decided it was better just to forget the whole thing and not get any ribbing from his friends."

Atkins looked at the sky and then finally sighed. "All right, Charley, let's see if we can find ourselves a drink."

WHEN THEY WERE GONE, I WENT BACK TO THE PUBLIC phone. I looked up H.C. Jefferson's telephone number and dialed.

When she answered, I said, "My name is Cardula. I'm a private detective. I have a client who says that he has something you lost last night. A briefcase. He's willing to return it to you. For a consideration, of course."

"Do you know what's in the briefcase?"

"He hasn't told me."

"Why does he need you at all?"

"He isn't certain what kind of a reception he might get. Therefore he has hired me as his intermediary. I'll be over in about ten minutes."

Actually, contrary to popular belief, I have a high sense of moral rectitude. I do not countenance counterfeiting or the passing of counterfeit bills.

However I thought that by meeting Helen C. Jefferson personally, and fairly often, I might be able to lead her from her path of crime.

It was certainly worth a try.

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

What fictional private detective was portrayed by actors Lloyd Nolan, Hugh Beaumont, and Jeff Chandler?

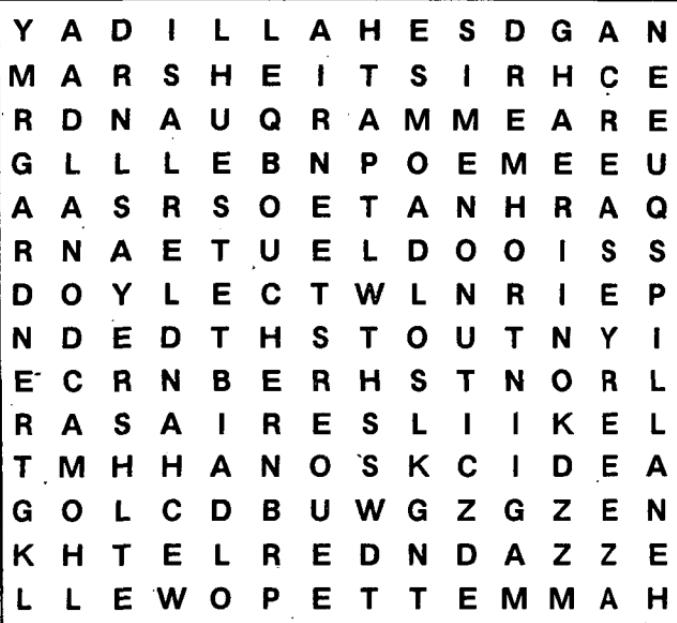
Mike Shayne

MYSTERY WRITERS WORD PUZZLE

by

Ralph Roberts

This puzzle has the names of several well-known mystery writers who were writing BEFORE 1950 hidden among its letters. You'll have to look closely because the words may read forward, backward, up, down, or diagonally. How many can you find? Good luck!



Answer on page 124

BELL	DICKSON	MARSH
BOUCHER	DOYLE	POWELL
BROWN	GARDNER	QUEEN
CARR	HALLIDAY	ROHMER
CHANDLER	HAMMETT	SAYERS
CHRISTIE	INNES	SIMENON
CREASEY	MACDONALD	SPILLANE
DERLETH	MARQUAND	STOUT

It was an unlikely disguise for a murderer — a clown carrying colorful balloons — but an effective one, to judge by the victims left in his wake!

The Doom Balloons

by EDWARD D. HOCH

BASIL RENFREW WAS AT HIS DESK EARLY THAT MORNING, puffing on his eternal cigar as he sorted through his mail. The stock exchange hadn't yet opened for the day, so the phone at his elbow was quiet, but the sound of Miss Jennings typing came to him clearly through the half-open door.

It was a few minutes before ten, by the digital clock on Renfrew's desk, when the first of the balloons appeared. It drifted in through the partly open door like a living thing, hovering near the floor for just an instant before beginning its steady rise across the room and toward the ceiling. Renfrew watched it with growing curiosity until a second one appeared behind it. Then he called out to his secretary. "Miss Jennings?" No answer. "Miss Jennings, what's going on here?"

But she didn't answer, and he realized her typing had ceased some minutes earlier. A large bunch of balloons floated through the doorway, with a few stragglers following.

Finally, in exasperation at this bizarre practical joke — for what else could it be? Basil Renfrew stabbed out at the nearest balloon with his lighted cigar.

The balloon popped and flared in his face, sending sudden flames shooting in all directions. Then the others were popping too, as a chain reaction of flame and fury seemed to whip across the room like lightning.

As the flames engulfed Renfrew and clung to his clothing, he died without ever realizing quite what was happening.

THAT, AT LEAST, WAS HOW I IMAGINE IT HAPPENED. SIR Gideon Parrot and I were called in on the case a few days later. It had been a hot summer in New York, and as it drew to a close I was surprised to learn of Gideon's return from London. He'd assisted Scotland Yard in a confidential matter involving the royal family, and I'd expected him to stay on as a guest at one of their country estates.

When I told him this he laughed. "It isn't done like that. I was a hired hand, doing what I was paid for."

"Are you needed here, Gideon?"

He nodded. "The matter of that stockbroker who burned to death in his office."

"Basil Renfrew. I read about it. A really bizarre accident."

"Bizarre, but hardly an accident."

"You mean — ?"

"His partner thinks it was murder, and I'm inclined to agree with him." Gideon reached into his pocket and took out some small pieces of colored rubber that seemed to have been scorched and puckered by fire.

"What are those?"

"The police found them in the burned office. Note the piece of charred string attached to this one. I believe they were balloons."

"Balloons!"

"The facts seem clear enough. In fact, the dead man's secretary remembers seeing a man with balloons in the hall when she was on her way to the ladies' room."

"Surely a man with balloons would attract attention in an office building!"

"One would think so," Gideon agreed. "In any event, I am assisting the police in their investigation. Do you wish to join me?"

"Of course!"

OUR FIRST STOP WAS THE BROKERAGE FIRM OF ROYAL AND Renfrew, where Basil Renfrew had come to his untimely end. Simon Royal, the surviving partner, was a tall slim man in his early sixties who wore expensive suits, and a gold watch on his wrist. His office was quietly elegant, with wood paneling, an oriental rug and a private entrance. He seemed saddened and upset by his partner's death.

"I didn't know the police used outside consultants," he said, shaking Sir Gideon's hand, "but I suppose it's no different from using a financial consultant."

"Not at all," Gideon agreed. "I study the techniques of murder as you might study the rise and fall of bond prices."

"Then you're convinced my partner was murdered?"

"Aren't you?"

Simon Royal nodded. "Yes, I am. That's what I told the police. In this business one makes a great many enemies. Give someone bad advice on an investment and he's your enemy for life."

"Who, specifically, might have wanted your partner dead?"

"Anyone from his former wife to a man named Lyon who was a partner in the firm until last year. We forced him out and he's resented it ever since. Tried to take legal action, but he had no grounds."

"What are their names?"

"Marie Renfrew was his wife until a few months ago. And Cal Lyon was our partner. I'll write down their addresses."

"I'll want to speak with Renfrew's secretary too."

"Miss Jennings. I'll show you to her office."

Helen Jennings was a tall young woman with dark hair and a good figure. After Royal introduced us and returned to his office, she explained that she'd been Basil Renfrew's secretary for a little over a year. "Did you know the other partner in the firm?" Gideon asked. "Cal Lyon?"

"Mr. Lyon left shortly after I started work here — within a matter of months. I never knew him well."

"Did he show any animosity toward Renfrew at the time?"

"I wasn't aware of any."

"And had he contacted Renfrew any time recently?"

She hesitated and then replied, "He may have. About two weeks ago there was a phone call that could have been him. I'm just not certain. Mr. Renfrew talked to him for a few minutes, and he seemed to be upset afterwards."

"I see." Gideon never took notes, but I could tell he was filing the information away nonetheless. "Now tell me about the day Mr. Renfrew died. Tell me everything that happened that morning."

Helen Jennings ran a nervous hand through her hair. "I hate to even think about it. The whole thing was so terrible. It was a little before ten in the morning and Mr. Renfrew was going through his mail as he always did. Once the market opens at ten I'll swear the phone never seems to stop ringing, but before that it's fairly peaceful — only a few calls from regulars. I'd just finished typing a letter he'd dictated the previous afternoon, and I was on my way out to the ladies' room when I saw the man with the balloons."

"You actually saw him."

"Oh, yes — quite clearly. He was about twenty feet away, just getting off the elevator with two huge bunches of balloons in all colors."

"What did he look like?"

"Tall — taller than me, even — and with a white face and big red lips. His hair was straw-colored. In fact, it was straw."

"What?" Gideon gasped. "He sounds like a clown!"

"Well, of course! He was a clown — a clown in a tuxedo and cape. I thought you knew."

"A clown in a tuxedo and cape, carrying two big bunches of balloons, got off the elevator and you didn't think it was unusual? Instead of following him you went on to the ladies' room?"

"We see them all the time. It's the Clown-O-Gram service. They deliver bouquets of balloons for people's birthdays, anniversaries, things like that. Everyone knows about them."

"Did this man speak?"

"Not that I heard. I just gave him a passing glance."

"So with that getup it might even have been a woman."

"Oh, I don't think — Well, I suppose so, but a tall woman."

"Things like a few inches in height can be easily changed," Gideon pointed out. "But go on with your story."

"There's nothing else to tell. When I came out of the ladies' room I could see some excitement down near my office. They told me there'd been a flash fire." Her voice quivered but did not break.

"Did you see the clown again after that?"

"No. I didn't even think about him. What could the balloons have had to do with the fire?"

"They may have caused it. Could I see Renfrew's office?"

"I suppose it's all right if you're working with the police."

She opened the door of the inner office and showed us the room where Basil Renfrew had died. There was surprisingly little serious damage, but the floor and walls and ceiling all bore scorch marks. The desk was charred a bit, and behind it there was a large burned area on the rug, apparently where Renfrew's body had lain.

"It's as if a fiery wind had blown through the place," I observed. Then, remembering the little pieces of colored rubber Gideon had obtained from the police I asked, "You think the balloons contained some sort of explosive mixture?"

"Not a mixture at all," Gideon Parrot said. "I believe they contained pure hydrogen."

"Hydrogen! I thought balloons were always filled with helium."

"They are, in this country. But prior to the Hindenburg disaster in 1937 hydrogen was favored for both airships and balloons because it was the most buoyant. Helium is now used exclusively in America because it's nonflammable, but some other countries — especially in the Middle East — still use hydrogen. An actor was burned recently by an explosion of hydrogen-filled balloons in Turkey."

"Do you think Renfrew's death might have been accidental, then?"

"Highly unlikely. Whoever brought those balloons knew exactly what they were doing. I think our next step should be the Clown-O-Gram offices."

A SLIM YOUNG MAN NAMED STEVE SHINE GREETED US AT the little storefront office that served as headquarters for the Clown-O-Gram operation. He was tall and agile, moving among rows of helium tanks and balloons of all colors as he came forward.

"What can I do for you today? Interested in our Honeymoon Special? Or the Birthday Blitz using two clowns and four bouquets of balloons?"

Gideon explained his connection with the police and our investigation of the killing of Basil Renfrew. "Did you deliver balloons to him on the day he died?"

"I doubt it, but I can check the records. Come on back to the office. Careful of the tanks!"

"These are all full of helium?" Gideon asked as we threaded our way down the narrow aisle.

"Sure!"

"Ever use hydrogen?"

"Are you kidding? It's against the fire laws."

"I just wondered."

He flipped through the pages of his ledger. "Nothing to Renfrew. I thought I'd remember it because I was doing clown duty that day."

"You deliver the balloons yourself?"

"Sometimes, if we're short-handed." He pointed to a white-faced, red-lipped clown mask hanging on the wall behind his desk. "When I get a call on short notice and don't have time to apply the clown makeup, I wear that mask."

"How many clowns work here?"

"We generally use part-time college kids. There are four, not counting myself."

It was clear enough that the murderer could easily have imitated a Clown-O-Gram type of delivery, launching the balloons into Renfrew's office while keeping clear of the danger area himself. Chances were Steve Shine had nothing to do with it, but Gideon wasn't ready to let him completely off the hook.

"We may have further questions. Here's a phone number where I can be reached. If anything unusual happens — anything suspicious involving yourself or your deliveries — I want to know about it right away."

"Sure," Shine said, taking Gideon's card.

WE DROVE ACROSS TOWN AND VISITED MARIE RENFREW next. The dead man's former wife was a stout middle-aged woman whom Gideon found difficult to question. She met us at the door of her apartment and wouldn't allow us over the threshold. "If you're detectives, show me your credentials. If you're not, be on your way!"

Gideon cleared his throat. "I work with the police in a private capacity."

"Sure, you do! And the minute I let you in, the two of you will jump on me and rape me!"

"My dear lady — "

"I can vouch for his identity," I said. "He really is Sir Gideon Parrot."

"You! So who are you?"

"I assist him unofficially in his investigations."

"Oh, I see! He assists the police unofficially, and you assist him unofficially! You're either a couple of rapists or a couple of nuts, and either way you don't get in!"

Gideon sighed and began again. "We're investigating the murder of

your husband."

"My former husband, and I don't know that he was murdered. He probably got so hot under the collar he just burnt up."

"Was he an excitable sort?"

"I don't talk about him any more. I don't even think about him if I can help it."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"There you go asking me more questions! I'm not answering questions from you two. Do you think you're Batman and Robin or something?"

"Hardly," Sir Gideon replied, drawing himself up with dignity. "I only recently completed an investigation involving the royal family."

"What royal family is that?"

Gideon saw that it was hopeless. "We may return later," he warned.

Back in the car I tried to console him. "Maybe the police should issue you an identity card."

But he was having none of it. "Thank heaven one does not encounter people that foolish very often. I must keep my unofficial status and deal with it the best I can."

"Who do we see next?" I asked, hoping things would improve.

"Cal Lyon, the former partner. I have his address right here."

AS CHANCE WOULD HAVE IT, OUR ROUTE TOOK US BACK through lower Manhattan. We were passing about a block from the offices of Royal and Renfrew when I pointed out the car window. "Look at that, Gideon. It's one of the Clown-O-Gram trucks."

"And there goes the clown himself, rounding the corner with his balloons!"

"Do you think he's going to Renfrew's building again?"

"Hurry! Park the car! There may not be a moment to lose."

Finding a parking space in that part of the city was no easy task. I dropped off Gideon, circled the block, and finally settled on a nearby parking garage. I caught up with him as he was boarding the elevator. "I lost sight of the balloons," he admitted, "but I think they came in here."

We got off at Renfrew's floor and immediately were engulfed in pandemonium. People were running in every direction, and a fire alarm-bell had started its shrill ringing. "What is it?" Gideon asked, grabbing Helen Jennings as she ran past.

"A fire in Mr. Royal's office!"

We hurried toward the doorway, but the heat and flames were too intense for anyone to enter. A fire extinguisher proved useless, and someone finally pulled a fire hose from its cabinet near the elevator. They hosed down the doorway and were beginning to contain the flames when the firemen arrived.

It was a half-hour before the last of the fire had died and the rubber-coated firemen could search among the charred, smoking remains of the office. We watched from the doorway as they uncovered the blackened body by the desk. I could see the remains of the gold watch on his wrist, and I knew the balloons had claimed the second partner of Royal and Renfrew.

GIDEON SPENT THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS CLOSETED WITH the police, telling them what little his investigation had uncovered. When he joined me later he was depressed. "A dozen witnesses saw the clown get off the elevator and enter Simon Royal's office with two big bunches of balloons, but once the fire started no one saw him. Obviously he removed his tuxedo and clown mask, perhaps even burning them in the fire, and mingled with the others in a more normal costume, or else escaped through Royal's private entrance."

"Didn't anybody think to stop him before he reached Royal's office?"

Gideon shook his head. "Remember, the police never announced our theory about hydrogen-filled balloons. The office employees had no reason to be alarmed. Helen Jennings might have remembered our questions about the balloon man, but apparently she didn't see him arrive today. She knew nothing until the fire broke out."

I shook my head, unable to comprehend the horror of it. "Did Royal have a family?"

"A wife up in Stamford. The police are checking with her now."

"Surely the same person killed both Royal and his partner."

"That seems more than likely. The murder method had not been announced and it's not the sort of thing two killers stumble upon accidentally."

"I think we're overdue for a visit to Cal Lyon," I said.

GIDEON AGREED. WE RETURNED TO THE CAR AND RESUMED our interrupted journey. Lyon was living in a converted loft near the financial district — a big, high-ceilinged room which he'd elaborately

divided into living and working space. If he'd arrived home just before us, he put on a good act, telephoning buy and sell orders for clients while his eyes scanned the stock exchange printouts on the little computer screen at his elbow. He gave every impression of not having budged from the spot since the market opening that morning.

"What is it?" he asked gruffly, hanging up the phone and twisting his big body to face us. "More police business about poor old Renfrew?"

"More than that, I'm afraid," Gideon Parrot told him. "Now Simon Royal has been killed in exactly the same manner."

"Simon! My God! Who are you — a private detective?"

"I assist the police."

"They think the same person killed both of them?"

"That's right," Gideon said. "Someone who had a grudge against the firm and its two partners."

"Meaning me."

"The possibility was suggested by Royal before his untimely death."

"I was about to settle all my claims and drop my lawsuit against the company. My lawyer will verify that. I had no reason for wanting either of them dead."

"Except revenge for being forced out of a highly profitable brokerage business."

Cal Lyon smiled. "Did he tell you it was highly profitable? If he did, he was a liar. During my final months there I began to suspect that Renfrew was cheating the company, diverting commissions to his private account rather than splitting them with us. More than that, I think he handled some very shady stock transactions. It was one of the reasons I left the partnership."

"Simon Royal said you were forced out."

"Forced out because I wanted him to investigate Renfrew's accounts!" he countered, suddenly angry. "I left and told them I was suing. But that was a year ago. Passions cool in a year's time."

It didn't seem to me that his had cooled too much, but I let it pass. Gideon did too, seeming more interested in facts than passions. "Could I ask where you were around noon?"

"Where? Right here, of course!"

"Any proof of that?"

"I talked to several people on the phone."

Gideon pointed to an answering machine prominently positioned

beside the desk. "The glowing red light indicates your machine is on."

"It's a busy day on Wall Street. I've had it on to intercept incoming calls so I could complete some transactions."

"I see. So you have no alibi for earlier."

"Have it whatever way you want. Got any witnesses who can identify me as the killer?"

"It seems the killer wore clown makeup or a mask."

"Like the Clown-O-Gram people?"

"Exactly."

"A friend sent me one of those on my birthday," Lyon said. "They're fun."

"Not when the balloons are filled with hydrogen."

"Yeah? Is that what the killer used to start the fires? A clever idea. I hope the cops are checking on their delivery men."

"They are," Gideon assured him. "But it sounds as if you admire the killer."

"I always admire clever ideas, in business or in crime. That doesn't mean I approve of murder. They were still friends of mine, despite our bad times."

"And you had no reason to wish them dead?"

"I told you the lawsuit was being dropped." A new set of stock quotations began moving across the screen and he grew preoccupied. "Call me again if I can be of further assistance," he said, clearly dismissing us. "The market's closing now and I'm busy."

Outside, I grumbled to Gideon. "Further assistance! He wasn't any assistance at all!"

"Perhaps not. We shall see. Right now it's important that I call in to Headquarters. I suggested they question Steve Shine and find out if any of the Clown-O-Gram drivers were at Royal's office this noon."

When he stepped out of the phone booth his face was grim. "What is it, Gideon?" I asked.

"They tell me Steve Shine has disappeared. He may have skipped town."

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SHINE WAS ONLY ONE MORE PIECE of the puzzle. For the first time we began to seriously consider the possibility that Shine was the killer after all, that no one had faked the Clown-O-Gram deliveries. But if that was the case, what could his motive be?

"The firm might have cheated him out of some money," Gideon

speculated. "Or given him some bad investment advice."

"If that was the case, why didn't he kill Cal Lyon too? He was one of the partners until last year."

"He may have tried!" Gideon answered, suddenly excited by the idea. "Remember, Lyon told us he'd received a Clown-O-Gram recently for his birthday. Perhaps that was a death trap that didn't work."

"Why wouldn't it have worked?"

"The balloons are safe until the hydrogen is ignited. Something has to set them off. I suppose a cigarette is the most likely thing, and Lyon doesn't appear to smoke."

"How do you know that?"

"There was no ashtray on his desk."

"What about Renfrew and Royal?"

"I believe Helen Jennings could best answer that. Let us pay a return visit to their office."

THE DEATH OF SIMON ROYAL HAD THROWN A PALL OF GLOOM over the brokerage firm. The offices were closed for the rest of the day, and most employees had already left for home. Police and arson investigators were still sifting through the ashes of Royal's gutted office, where virtually nothing had escaped destruction. We found Helen Jennings cleaning out her desk, filling a box with personal effects from her drawers.

"I wouldn't work here another day," she told us. "Not with some madman trying to kill us all!"

"The killings may be at an end," Gideon Parrot said. "But I must ask you one more question. Did Basil Renfrew smoke?"

"He was never without a big cigar, from morning to night. I used to kid him about it."

"And Simon Royal?"

"I don't think he smoked. I never noticed."

That news troubled Gideon. I could see it didn't fit with his theory. "May I use your telephone? I must call Cal Lyon again."

I stood close enough so I could hear Lyon's response in the receiver. "I told you I was busy now, Mr. Gideon. No more questions."

"Sir, I have only two questions for you. Earlier you said you'd received a Clown-O-Gram for your birthday. Who was it from?"

"The card was signed *Your former co-workers at Royal & Renfrew*. I never found out just who sent it, but it was nice of them."

"How long ago was this?"

"My birthday was a week ago Monday."

"And what happened to the balloons?"

"There were two big bunches of them. I was going to keep them for a while, but I really had no place to put them here. Finally I opened the window and just let them float away over the city."

"That may have saved you life," Gideon said.

"You mean they were filled with hydrogen like the others?"

"Exactly."

"My God!"

"Be very careful, Mr. Lyon. If there are any future deliveries, please report them to the police."

After Gideon had hung up I asked him, "Do you really think Lyon's life is in danger?"

"It's a possibility. Of course a clever killer might make up the story of the balloon delivery so he'd appear to be one of the intended victims."

We spoke briefly to the chief arson investigator before we left. He was a bright-looking man named Lieutenant Tragger, but he was the first to admit his lack of experience with hydrogen fires. "If you hadn't told me about the balloons I'd say it was a firebomb of some sort — a bottle of gasoline with a wick in it. Did a hell of a lot of damage, to the office and the body both."

When we returned to the car Gideon invited me home with him, to the luxury apartment overlooking Central Park that he used when he was in New York. It belonged, he said, to a wealthy Middle Eastern personage for whom he'd once done a considerable favor. There was an answering machine hooked up to the telephone, as there had been at Cal Lyon's place, and Gideon turned it on to see if there'd been any messages.

Surprisingly, the voice we heard was that of the missing Steve Shine. "Sir Gideon, you asked me to phone this number if anything unusual happened involving my deliveries. You've only been gone about a half-hour but I just received an order to deliver a double Clown-O-Gram to Simon Royal at his office. I'm about to leave now and I thought you should know about it."

"That's it!" Gideon exclaimed, hitting the table with his hand. "The missing piece of the puzzle!"

"You mean that Shine killed — ?"

"Come on! We've not a moment to lose!"

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Cal Lyon's loft."

IT WAS AFTER FIVE WHEN I PARKED THE CAR ABOUT A BLOCK away from Lyon's place. I was about to get out, but Gideon held me back. "Let's wait here a bit. The streets are crowded."

And indeed they were, as people finished their day's work and hurried toward the subway entrances. "But Lyon won't be leaving," I pointed out. "He lives right there."

"I know."

"You think Lyon killed them to force the company out of business? So he'd get all their clients?"

"No, I think Lyon is about to *be* killed. If the murderer failed once, last week, he may want another try before he leaves the city."

"Leaves the city? We're back to Steve Shine again. He's the only one who's left."

"There is one other."

"Someone who left? You mean today?"

"I mean today."

The crowds were thinning now, and as we talked the shadows grew longer. In another hour this old loft neighborhood would be almost deserted. "Marie Renfrew looked as if she might be going somewhere. Is that who you mean? I suppose a woman could wear that clown outfit as easily as a man could."

Gideon Parrot suddenly gripped my arm. "Over there," he said softly.

I followed his gaze and saw someone on the side street getting out of a parked car. It was a tall person wearing a tuxedo and a clown mask, and he was pulling two large bunches of multi-colored balloons out of the car after him.

"There's our killer," Gideon announced. "We must hurry."

"Those balloons are deadly, Gideon. Let's call the police."

"No time for the police. Come on!"

I followed him reluctantly across the street, remembering our similar chase just a few hours earlier, when we'd been too late to save the life of Simon Royal. But this time luck was on our side, if you could call it that. We entered the lobby of Lyon's building only a moment after the clown with the balloons. He was still there, waiting for the slow-moving elevator, when he saw us.

He released his grip on one bunch of balloons, letting them float free

to the ceiling. Then with his empty right hand he pulled a cigarette lighter from the pocket of his tuxedo. He shoved the other balloons toward us and flicked on the lighter.

"Get back!" Gideon shouted to me.

There was a sudden flare of fire shooting out in all directions, scorching the walls and ceiling. Gideon and I dropped to the floor as it passed overhead like a roar from a blast furnace. The clown had grabbed for the other bunch of balloons just as the doors slid open on the empty elevator, but he'd underestimated the radius of the flames. Suddenly one of his balloons flared, and then the rest went with a terrible whoosh. He screamed as the searing flames drove him into the elevator.

"Don't let him get away!" Gideon yelled, diving through the flame and smoke to reach the elevator doors before they slid shut.

We reached them just in time, and pounced upon the fallen figure on the elevator floor. Already the fire had burnt itself out against the tile and marble lobby, finding nothing to feed upon, but it had done its job on the murderous clown. The fight had gone out of him as Gideon reached for the mask that still hid his face from us.

In that final instant I thought I knew the answer. Yes, there was one other person who'd been going away that day. Helen Jennings was quitting her job at the brokerage firm, and we'd watched her clean out her desk.

But the face behind the mask didn't belong to Helen Jennings.

It was the face of Simon Royal, back from the dead, but just barely.

WE TURNED HIM OVER TO LIEUTENANT TRAGGER AND THE homicide detectives, who placed him under arrest while they waited for an ambulance to get him to the hospital. Then I demanded an explanation from Gideon. "You couldn't have known it was Simon Royal," I insisted.

"I had a pretty good idea. The first thing that struck me was the physical evidence — the appearance of the two murder scenes. Basil Renfrew's office was badly scorched but otherwise intact. Simon Royal's office was totally gutted. Lieutenant Tragger even remarked that it seemed more like a gasoline firebomb to him. And that's exactly what it was. Basil Renfrew was killed by hydrogen balloons, and those were obviously hydrogen balloons that went off here earlier, but none went off in Simon Royal's office. He had to be certain the body couldn't be identified after the fire, if he wanted people to believe he was dead.

So he used a powerful gasoline bomb like a Molotov cocktail."

"Gideon, if that wasn't Royal's body in his office, whose was it?"

"The man who entered the office with the balloons and the clown mask — Steve Shine, of course."

"Shine! You mean it wasn't the killer we spotted going into Royal and Renfrew's building this noon?"

"Not that time. It was Steve Shine making what he thought was a legitimate delivery. The balloons contained harmless helium, but when he walked into that office, Royal was waiting. He hit him over the head, placed his gold watch on Shine's wrist for identification purposes, and then set off a firebomb of inflammable liquid. While the office blazed and people came running, he escaped through his private entrance. He'd lured Shine there with the balloons, of course, so that his supposed murder would be linked with the killing of Renfrew, and the later killing of Cal Lyon."

"But why did he want them all dead?"

"Because it wasn't Renfrew who was defrauding the company and its clients, it was Royal. When Cal Lyon filed his lawsuit, Royal feared the court procedure would reveal the truth. He failed to kill Lyon last week, but when Renfrew began to suspect him he succeeded in his second attempt. Then he decided to fake his own death and take off for South America with the money he'd milked from the company. Shine was the logical victim to substitute for him. They were both tall, about the same build, and he was relying on the fire to make positive identification impossible. Since the body was in Royal's own office, wearing his watch, no one would have bothered to check dental records. There'd be no question it was him."

"How did he know Shine would deliver the balloons he ordered?"

"I imagine he checked on the company's practice. It was no secret that Shine made the deliveries when no one else was in the office, and the lunch hour was the most likely time for that. If someone else had arrived with the balloons, who bore no resemblance to Royal, he'd merely have postponed his plan."

"And Lyon?"

"I realized Royal was the killer after I heard the message Shine left me. He never would have phoned to tell me he was on the way to commit murder. And I figured Royal might have one more try at killing Lyon before he left town. He couldn't risk Lyon putting everything together and realizing the embezzler was Royal rather than Renfrew."

"You told me the killer was leaving town today. I thought it was

Helen Jennings. I didn't think about Royal having left anywhere."

"We thought he was dead, and death is about as long a journey as anyone takes," Gideon said.

I thought it was an especially long journey to take by balloon. ●

WANTED!

ALL CROOKS AND EVIL DOERS

DEAD OR ALIVE



BY
DEADWOOD DICK
HE'LL BE SEEN SOON
IN THIS VICINITY

The ambassador wasn't totally thrilled with his job, but it was the best he could do. Things could certainly not get worse, he thought — until the door burst inward and two masked figures came into the room with machine guns!

Ransom

by WILLIAM BABULA

AMBASSADOR MILTON MACAULEY LEANED BACK IN HIS chair, locked his fingers behind his head, and looked at the antique clock on the mahogany table on the other side of his office. The heavy red drapes were open and he could see past the embassy yard, past the open iron gate in the stone wall, to the crowds pressing through the street. The few cars on the dusty road seemed to be mired in peasants going to market. From the street the ambassador could hear Spanish curses rising like heat waves to his window. In the courtyard the dark green palms did not stir.

In the past he would not have sat in his office with the drapes open, no matter what the time of day or the weather, but with the recently installed bulletproof glass he no longer worried about a terrorist assassin. For local travel he now had an armored car that was driven by a chauffeur trained in evasionary tactics. As far as possible they

never took the same route twice. Ambassador Macauley stroked the neatly trimmed silver goatee that was the same color as his hair and smiled in his security.

Milton Macauley knew what this tiny hot Latin American country was like when he accepted the position. He also realized it was the only ambassadorship that he was ever likely to get. For a career diplomat near retirement there would be few opportunities to become an ambassador. But after the usual political appointments went to the Court of St. James, Paris, Bonn, Vienna, Moscow, and the rest, there remained a small Latin American capital where you couldn't drink the water, stand the food, or find decent medical and dental care. So there had been an assignment for Milton Macauley.

The ambassador got up from his chair and, wondering where his wife was, stepped around his massive marbletop desk. He brushed his light coat jacket with his right hand, combed his shimmering hair, and straightened his tie with the American Eagle design. As he had aged he had grown more ruggedly handsome, as if his features had been chiseled out of stone, and he realized his looks had helped him with an administration very concerned with appearances. As remote as this post was, there were a dozen others who wanted it. He stood on the soft wool carpet, listening to the uneven whir of the air conditioning as it struggled against the hot dry summer. All about him the room seemed flooded by waves of sunlight.

Suddenly the heavy wooden double doors to his office flew open and two figures in loose green army fatigues rushed into the room. They wore nylon stockings over their faces and carried gleaming black submachine guns.

"*Senor* Ambassador, you come with us," the taller one said in husky broken English.

"This is an outrage," Ambassador Macauley shouted.

"Move," the other one, who was not much taller than five feet said.

The ambassador stepped toward the doors while the short one put a firm grip on his left arm.

Using the barrels of their submachine guns they pushed the ambassador past the empty desk of the receptionist into the darkened hallway. It was empty. There seemed to be no one in the other offices and they all moved undisturbed to the staircase. But as they descended a young marine guard in blue dress uniform came through a doorway and he immediately reached for the automatic he carried in a holster at his side. Before he could get it out a line of bullets ripped open his

chest and he collapsed against a maroon wall tapestry like a toy soldier. The boy's hat tumbled to the floor and the Ambassador could see the white skin of his scalp beneath his short blond haircut.

"Oh my God!" the ambassador whispered, the words catching in his throat.

They rushed out the embassy doors, through the courtyard and the open iron gate. Behind them they could hear the first sounds of confusion and panic in the embassy. The ambassador was shoved into the back seat of a green and white 1956 Chevrolet parked in the street. As the horn blared and the car thrust forward, small children jumped away from the tires and the crowd of peasants parted.

In the back seat the short one took out a black cloth and blindfolded the ambassador. Faces stared into the car as if they were looking into a store window.

When they were clear of the peasants the one in the back seat pulled up the stocking.

"I can breathe again," she said in English. Her hair tumbled to her shoulders as she shook herself free.

At first they could hear the pulsing sirens of police cars in the city, but soon they were on the dirt roads on the outskirts of the capital, climbing into the hills. Ninety minutes later they were in a small building on an overgrown slope that looked out over the central valley and the city. The car was hidden in the thick vegetation and nothing suspicious would be visible from the air. And they were close enough to the village for their purposes.

Except for the marine guard, it had gone off smoothly.

THAT NIGHT MARTHA MACAULEY WENT ON NATIONAL TV TO beg the kidnappers to release her husband. Her picture formed and dissolved on the screen like a puzzle breaking apart. When the transmission problems were solved she tried to begin again. On the screen she appeared to be dressed in black, as if she were already in mourning. Her hair, pulled back into a matronly bun, was like her husband's, a silvery white. Her eyes were puffy with tears and her full lips quivered when she spoke of the man to whom she had been married for twenty-five years.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice pleading to the dark void. An emotionless voice translated her words into Spanish.

"What do you want?" she repeated as she broke down in tears in front of the camera.

She wondered if anyone in this poverty-stricken country would be watching.

THE NEXT DAY MR. ADRIAN COLE, THE AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVE from the State Department, *Comandante* Gomez of the *Policia Secreta*, and *Prime Ministro* Morales learned that the kidnappers wanted nothing. Nothing that is but the death of the representative of American imperialism, exploitation, and tyranny at the hands of the Liberationist Army. The message was on a tape delivered to the prime minister's palace by a small peasant boy.

Two guards in elaborate green and gold uniforms brought the boy into the main hall of the palace. Everyone except the boy and the guards was sitting on the enormous upholstered furniture. The boy, a child of about ten dressed in rags, shifted his bare feet nervously. His dark brown eyes seemed to grow to saucers to fill half his thin, already aged, face.

"We found these pesos in his pocket," the older guard said.

The money fell on a handcarved wooden table that stood on a cool tile floor.

El Comandante took off his hat and ran his hand through oily black hair. Then he pushed himself out of his chair, raising his bulk with difficulty. *El Comandante* was a short man who weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds. His uniform, despite the best efforts of his tailors, looked like a green tent. Gomez was known for his efficiency and brutality, not for intelligence.

"Where did you get the pesos?" Gomez asked the frightened boy.

"The pesos are mine," the boy forced out.

When the blow came the boy's dark face went to ash and a trickle of blood began to run from the corner of his thin mouth.

"Do not bleed on the floor," *El Comandante* ordered.

With a dry tongue, the boy licked away the blood.

"*Senor Gomez*," the American representative said, "you are too hard on the boy."

El Comandante looked at tall, thin, elegant Mr. Cole with undisguised disdain.

But when the prime minister said, "Perhaps Mr. Cole is correct," *El Comandante* slowly and heavily sank back into his seat. The prime minister was a handsome young man, not yet thirty, who had come to power when his father had been kidnapped and murdered. He had inherited his father's ~~LICENSE TO KIDNAP~~ ^{LICENSE TO KIDNAP} ~~palace, his father's fleet~~ ^{palace, his father's fleet} of cars, and he had

added a collection of his own women.

"My boy," the prime minister said, "it is your money." He picked it up and handed it carefully to the child who shoved it back into his pocket.

"You may keep it," the prime minister added, "if you tell us where you got the tape."

The boy looked up with clear eyes at the high walls hung with tapestries depicting the glorious history of the country.

"A man stopped me as I was playing in the street and paid me to bring it here."

"What did he look like?" *El Comandante* asked.

After a look at the American in the gray suit and at the Prime Minister who nodded his head, the boy answered: "He was an old man with long white hair. He wore a torn orange Indian shawl. Most of his teeth were missing. His face was marked by a thousand lines."

"Had you ever seen him before?" *El Comandante* asked.

Reluctantly the boy said, "No *Senor*. He was not from our district."

"It could be any one of a million peasants," Gomez said.

The prime minister added: "The old man was paid to find a child to deliver the tape. It could have passed through a dozen hands. It is a cold trail."

"What do we do?" Adrian Cole asked.

El Comandante shrugged his shoulders, shaking his epaulets and the rows of medals on his massive chest.

THE AMBASSADOR SAT ON A COT BY A CRUDE BATTERY-operated tape recorder reading from the long sheet that the terrorists had prepared for him. The two women sat with their masks off on two wobbly wooden chairs. Their oiled submachine guns were propped up a few feet away against the bare wall.

Milton Macauley's voice droned on, confirming that he was in the hands of the Liberationist Army. He read the statements about American crimes and American imperialism in Latin America.

Suddenly, as he approached the end of the sheet he began to shout, "Don't surrender to them. We can't be pushed around by terrorists. We . . ."

The short woman who had brown sandy hair, blue eyes, and freckles shut off the recorder.

"That's enough, Mr. Ambassador," she said coldly. Her accent sounded like it came from the American Southwest.

The taller olive-skinned woman stood the ambassador up against the far wall then turned to the other woman who nodded her head as a signal. Then she slapped Milton Macauley across each cheek several times until his face puffed up.

"Enough," the other woman said as she snapped on the flash attachment to her Polaroid camera.

AGAIN MRS. MACAULEY, LOOKING DRAWN, THINNER, AND more in mourning, appeared on national TV. This time there was no difficulty with the transmision which reached every area of the country. Of course there were few televisions but that did not matter.

She pleaded for her husband's life and asked the kidnappers what they wanted. On the latest tape they had repeated their threat to execute the ambassador but had made no demands. They had only sent the picture of a beaten man.

"What do you want?" she said through tears large enough to glisten on her makeup on the TV screen. The Spanish translation followed.

Back in the United States portions of her plea were rebroadcast on the nightly news programs of all the networks.

"I AM STILL WELL," THE AMBASSADOR SAID IN A WEAK voice and then shouted, "don't give in . . ."

On the tape there was the sound of a slap and the sound of furniture crashing. The tape ran on, giving the audience what seemed to be the distant cries of Ambassador Macauley.

"Oh my God," Mrs. Macauley said. In person she looked younger and fresher than she did on television.

Seven tense days had gone by before this tape arrived at the palace, delivered by another small child who had been paid by a peasant woman. As in the other case, the boy knew nothing useful.

But this time, to Mrs. Macauley's relief, the Liberationist Army expressed a willingness to forego the execution of the American pig in exchange for freedom for all Liberationist Army members imprisoned in the country and a yet to be negotiated amount of American cash.

Mr. Cole, *El Comandante*, Mrs. Macauley, and the prime minister sat in the large main room of the palace listening to the tape over and over again. Long shadows began to fall across the room from the barred windows.

"They will settle for the release of the political prisoners," the American said. "We can negotiate it." He wore the same elegant

gray suit and had added a supercilious smile.

El Comandante said, barely controlling the tone of his voice, "They are not political prisoners. They are criminals. Murderers, rapists, terrorists . . ."

"Mr. Cole," the young prime minister interrupted, "I know these men. My father died in the hands of kidnappers. Once they have their prey it is money or blood."

"Adrian," Mrs. Macauley said, "the government is going to pay, isn't it?"

The American representative shifted uneasily in the overstuffed chair he occupied.

"We are trying to establish a firm policy on ransom. The president is considering refusing to pay ransom for any kidnapped diplomat."

The prime minister walked over to one of the large mirrors against the near wall. He seemed to be admiring himself in the glass.

"I hope," he said, "you are never kidnapped, Mr. Cole. So you are considering not paying ransom? Who do you think you are, the Israelis?"

Mrs. Macauley pleaded, "I beg you, Adrian."

Mr. Cole looked at his watch and sighed. "I will have to call Washington."

LATER THAT NIGHT A SOMEWHAT MORE COMPOSED MRS. Macauley appeared on national TV and told the kidnappers that she believed the United States would pay the ransom but that the prisoners would not be released. That was the government's offer. This time she did not cry but instead stared out firmly at the camera eye.

"How much do you want?" she asked.

WHEN THE LAST TAPE WAS DELIVERED TO THE PALACE BY A small girl in rags and torn sandals, the same four people gathered in the conference room to hear it. They sat along a handcarved mahogany table under elaborately painted plaster ceilings and a large chandelier that a half-dozen rococo cherubs seemed to support.

El Comandante placed the tape in the player on the table and it began to cough and spit.

"I hope the damn thing doesn't break," Cole said.

"When the voice began it provided in good English the numbers of six bank accounts, two in Zurich, two in Geneva, and two in Nassau. When the deposits in each account were confirmed the ambassador

would be released unharmed. The voice directed them to deposit \$500,000 in each account in twenty-four hours or the ambassador would be a dead man.

Then the tape ran blank.

"Not a word of the Liberationist Army prisoners," Gomez sneered.

The prime minister leaned back in his chair, looked at Adrian Cole, and asked, "Well?"

Mrs. Macauley shot up from her seat, "My God, we have to pay."

The American representative stood up and walked to the huge window that overlooked a swimming pool that seemed as large as a lake. Rows of marble statues ran in neat lines from the pool to the watered tropical gardens that, along with tennis courts, riding trails, and a soccer field, made up the rest of the palace grounds.

"We could mortgage the palace," Cole said as he stared past the wrought iron work that protected the window. He wondered how the prime minister's father had been kidnapped. "Three million dollars . . . three million dollars. If only we had some way of negotiating with them."

"Adrian, they've only given us 24 hours. We have no way of communicating with them," Mrs. Macauley said, almost hysterically.

"Well?" the prime minister repeated with a condescending smile on his aristocratic lips.

Cole scratched his head and said, "We don't seem to have a choice, do we?"

"I think not," the prime minister said.

"Can we trace the accounts?" *El Comandante* asked.

"Impossible," the American said. "The Swiss and the Bahamians will not cooperate. If we got them to, the numbered accounts would have been changed. And if they cooperated there would be no secure way of dealing with such situations in the future."

The prime minister smiled and said, "Then let us hope you will get the ambassador alive and well for your money."

"I pray to God!" Mrs. Macauley exclaimed.

On their way out of the room, Cole whispered to Gomez: "The last thing the American government wants to do is pay \$3,000,000 for a dead man."

Mrs. Macauley seemed to catch his words as she passed through the enormous bronze doors.

village Ambassador Macauley stepped out of the back seat of the 1956 Chevrolet. His tie hung loose about his neck; he carried his coat over one shoulder. His silver hair had not been washed in days; his goatee was scraggly. He needed a shave and he knew that he stank.

When he saw some Indian peasants by the creek along the side of the road he began to babble in Spanish for the *Policia*.

The peasants called him *loco* and fled from him as if he were a demon. Milton Macauley, dragging his feet through the dust as he walked, knew he would be discovered soon.

The dispatches stated that the ambassador had been found wandering on a remote road, incoherent. Despite his ordeal, the physical examination showed that he had lost some weight but was in good condition otherwise. The reports emphasized the growing strength of the Liberationist Army in this tiny country.

Ambassador Macauley insisted that he would remain at his post.

After a stay in the capital hospital for observation and testing, and a brief trip to Washington, D.C. to meet with the president, the ambassador returned to duty at the embassy with doubled security. There would be no more kidnappngs and no more ransoms to pay. Shortly afterwards the President of the United States established the policy that ransom would not be paid for kidnapped diplomats.

Martha Macauley stepped into the office, kissed the ambassador on the cheek, and looked out into the crowded street through the open drapes. The bulletproof glass seemed to distort the picture before her, as if she were seeing it through summer heat waves. The numbers ran through her head: 2146857 and 42172608 respectively in Nassau and Geneva. In each account she now held \$500,000. The second million went to the two women who had executed the kidnapping. And the third million went to the prime minister. It was what he felt he deserved now that foreign aid had been cut by the United States.

Martha Macauley decided she would have to do something for the mother of the marine killed by the kidnappers.

"I just wanted to stop in on my way to meet some friends," she said.

She went down the steps, past the guard and the security gate. She slipped into the back seat of a newly painted 1956 Chevrolet and kissed the short freckled woman and the tall olive-skinned one each on the lips.

"To the airport, darlings," Mrs. Macauley whispered. In her purse she carried tickets for the three of them to Costa Rica. ●

He was a loser at the game of MONOPOLY, but in the real game of life things were looking up!

GOTCHA!

by JAY FOX

“FOUR, FIVE, SIX.” I COUNTED OFF THE SPACES FROM Illinois Avenue on the Monopoly board, clicking along with the little metal shoe that was my marker. “Go to jail. Good deal!” At that stage of the game there was no place I’d rather be, safe for a while from my neighbor Harry Belmont and the menacing string of hotels he owned along the far side of the board.

“Hold it, Ed. You rolled seven, not six. That puts you on Pacific Avenue which I just happen to own. With a hotel, that’s going to cost you \$1,275.”

“I rolled six. A four and a two.” I was positive. Well, almost positive.

“A four and a *three*, old buddy,” He pointed to the dice lying near his left hand. “Read ‘em and weep. I gotcha!”

The dice did show a four and a three, but I couldn’t help thinking Harry had turned one of them to bring me down on his property for the second time in so many turns. I gave his wife Althea a questioning look.

She shrugged and said, “I wasn’t watching. I’ve been trying to figure what I’ll have to mortgage to put a hotel on Baltic.” Althea was safe in jail where I’d hoped to be. I’d have been happy with her almost anywhere. But for this beautiful blonde wife, I would not have spent an hour, much less the whole afternoon with blustering, conniving or incredibly lucky Harry Belmont.

HARRY HAD INVITED ME OVER EARLIER THAT SUNDAY TO SEE the newest handgun in his already extensive collection, a Dan Wesson .44 magnum revolver with a ten-inch barrel. He swung out the cylinder, ejected the six cartridges and handed the weapon to me.

I hefted it and said, "My God, a gun this big should be mounted on wheels and towed behind a Jeep. It looks more like a cannon than a revolver to me." I handed it back.

"Ah, but watch this," Harry said like a kid with a new toy. "With just a twist or two of this little wrench, the ten inch barrel comes off. And just as quickly, I can fit the same frame with a four, six or eight inch barrel."

"Marvelous," I said wryly, watching him work. "It's just like an Erector set." Not often do I get a chance to jibe Harry.

"Come on, Ed. Remember how anxious you were to have me check out that new skeet gun of yours?"

"Mmm-hmmm," I admitted, but that was only an excuse to see Althea and enrich my lurid fantasies. Today she was wearing a pair of snug white shorts and a skimpy, low-cut halter top that revealed an almost indecent amount of cleavage.

"Hand me the four-inch barrel and shroud, would you, Ed? That's the smallest set in the case."

I gave him the parts he asked for, but my eyes drifted back to that soft valley of sun-bronzed flesh before he had them in place. "Get the feel of it now," Harry said.

"Hungh?" Distracted, I turned abruptly and saw that he was offering back the now much shorter revolver: "Oh, yeah... sure."

"Squeeze her a few times," he urged. "You can't hurt a Dan Wesson by dry firing it. See how smooth and sweet the trigger is?"

I aimed the empty gun at the floor and clicked off a couple of imaginary rounds. "Yeah, it's nice, Harry. Real nice, but I still prefer my smooth bore and shooting targets on the fly."

He sighed like I was a hopeless case and said, "I was going to shoot skeet once, but Althea doesn't know how to cook them."

"Oh, Harry," she moaned. "Don't you two get to talking guns again. Let's do something we can all enjoy."

"Like what, Althea?" I liked saying her name. It echoed softly like wind chimes in my mind.

"How about Monopoly?"

"Good idea," Harry agreed. "I'll get the set." He's a devoted game player. I'm one who thinks board games should be spelled *b-o-r-e-d*.

but I didn't want to leave.

"Do me a favor, Ed. Reload that revolver and put it in the drawer of the nightstand on my side of the bed. Althea will show you where, but she doesn't like to handle guns."

That's one of Harry's own little games, coming up with flimsy reasons to send me into their bedroom with his wife. He must know how it tortures me, Althea being so tempting and so unattainable.

"PAY UP, ED. FOR A BANKER YOU'RE DAMN SLOW," HARRY said, the light of greed fairly dancing in his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah." I began counting out the cash for landing on Pacific Avenue. There wasn't much left when I was through, and I still thought I'd been cheated. That made me dislike Harry all the more.

He's been one up on me for five years, ever since we chanced to buy adjacent houses in a new tract. Mine's a two bedroom model, his is a three even though he and Althea have never had kids. When I put in a patio, he put in a pool. When I got promoted to Loan Officer at the bank, Harry started his own business. I bought a new Volvo, he bought a new Porsche. I gave my wife Lynn a fur collared suede coat Christmas before last, he gave Althea a full-length mink.

I remember how Lynn *ooohed* and *aaahed* when Althea insisted she try on that luxurious ranch mink. The fox collared suede coat I'd given her became quickly third rate. Three months after that, Lynn divorced me and went to live with our son's orthodontist. They've since married. Lynn now wears sable and drives a Mercedes, and I blame Harry at least partly for that. He still has Althea, and she's far better looking than Lynn ever was.

"It's my turn," she said. My eyes glazed with envy when Althea leaned over the table, reaching for the dice. Then she rolled back her head as though in prayer to heaven above. "No doubles. Please, no doubles!" That swirled her long golden hair and made my heart ache.

Althea rolled a five and remained safe in jail for another turn. Her prayer had been answered. I could not even give voice to mine.

Harry's top hat marker rested on St. Charles Place right next to the jail. I owned that and had three houses on the property. Last turn it cost him \$450, now a five, seven or eight would land him on St. James, Tennessee or New York where I had hotels. That would even things up . . . except for Althea and the almost insane yearning I had for her.

Harry rolled a nine and passed my hotels to land on Free Parking at the corner of the board. He hooted in triumph, enjoying my obvious distress only because he didn't know — I don't think — what it was

I wanted most from him.

I rolled a six, double threes, and crashed on his Park Place hotel like a wounded sparrow with a broken wing. "Gotcha!" he cried. "Gotcha again! That's \$1,500 you owe me, and you threw doubles so you roll again."

I had to sell off my hotels on St. James, Tennessee and New York and mortgage the property to pay Harry his due. Then I rolled doubles again, a little deuce that put me on his Boardwalk hotel two spaces down.

"Gotcha! Gotcha! GOTCHA!" he cried in exaltation. That was Harry's favorite word. If I hadn't put away his fancy new magnum revolver with the interchangeable barrels, I'd have shot him before he could say *gotcha* three times.

"That's it, Harry. I'm busted," I said in weary resignation. I owed him \$2,000 and could only raise \$200 by mortgaging my two railroads, the only property I had still clear.

"Borrow it from the bank," he suggested. "Just put in an I.O.U."

"Banks don't operate that way, Harry. Not even in Monopoly."

"So bend the rules a little, keep the game going. You might bounce right back."

"With everything I own in hock? No way. I'm down the tubes and Althea is almost, why prolong the agony?"

"Ed's right," she agreed. Althea had only the two cheapest properties on the board and she could not afford to develop those. Harry had, or soon would ruin us both. He had it all. "I'm going to start dinner. Would you like to join us, Ed?"

"Sure, if it's not too much trouble."

"None at all," she assured me, leaving the room. My eyes strayed to follow her swaying hips. If Bo Derek and Susan Anton had been walking beside her, I would not have noticed either of them.

Harry waited a moment and said, "Glad you can stay," in an uncharacteristically soft tone. "I need to discuss something with you."

"Oh?" It had to sound apprehensive. Harry could hardly have missed all the times lately that I've ogled his wife.

He started putting away all the Monopoly paraphernalia, dragging the task out as though stalling for time. "I do great at board games," he said finally, "but I've got a little cash flow problem in real life. It's temporary, of course, but right now —"

"You need a loan," I guessed. Bankers develop that kind of intuition. Little but a pressing need for cash makes a schemer like

Harry Belmont start beating around the bush. "Stop by my office tomorrow morning and we'll see what I can do." How great it felt to be one up on him at last.

"I — I need \$25,000," he said in a thin, dry and rasping voice.

I let out a low whistle, and just then Althea came walking back into the room. "Thought you guys might like a beer," she said with a smile, setting down two chilled mugs and two frosty bottles of Dos Equis. Nothing but the best for Harry even if his business was suffering an apparently near-terminal case of the shorts.

When she'd returned to the kitchen again, I took a cooling sip of the dark Mexican beer and said, "Harry, that's a very big loan for a business the size of yours." I enjoyed rubbing that in.

"I know. I was too embarrassed to come to you at first. I've been to three other banks, and they all turned me down."

"Oh, well — " I took a long sip, savoring Harry's discomfort even more than the rich, dark Mexican beer. " — then it's not likely we can help you. Loan policy is pretty much the same in this town."

"I — I thought you might be able to push it through for me."

"Like you thought I should put a worthless I.O.U. in the till to keep the Monopoly game going?"

"Come on, Ed. Don't make me feel worse than I do already. I need that loan to keep the company going until our new line takes off."

"Harry, I couldn't help you if I wanted to. A loan that size would have to be approved by a committee of three senior officers. I just do the background work for them, get the credit reports and financial statement verification."

He thought a moment, staring bleakly into his glass. I was starting to feel a little sorry for him when he said, "Maybe you could make my application look good to that committee . . . leave out a few debit items, verify a couple of production contracts that haven't been signed quite yet?"

"Harry! I'd be risking my job, my whole future. If I did that and the loan went sour — "

"But it won't go sour! I'm going to complete those deals, but I need money to work with."

"What about refinancing your house?"

"I've already done that."

"A loan against your life insurance?"

He sighed dejectedly. "I've borrowed all I can on my policy, and we haven't had Althea's long enough for it to accumulate cash value."

"The Porsche? Your gun collection?" I knew I had his tail in a wringer and I enjoyed turning the crank.

"The car's in hock and I've sold all the best guns. You're my last hope, Ed."

I asked him coldly, "What's in it for me?" I wanted to see just how far he would go.

His look brightened. "I could slip you a grand if that loan goes through."

"I can't hear you."

"Five then. Make the loan for thirty and you'll get five thousand bucks tax free."

That was tempting I'll admit. Nobody gets rich working for a bank, and the risk was not all that great I was starting to think. Harry did have a cat's natural talent for landing on his feet no matter what life threw him.

But giving me \$5,000 of the bank's money would hardly phase Harry at all. If his business picked up again because of the loan, he'd consider that petty cash. Althea's mink coat cost more than that. I know because he bragged the price to Lynn just to make me look more like the dreary plodder he so often implied I was. That hurt, and if Harry was so desperate for my help now, it would have to hurt him.

"The \$5,000 is O.K. for openers," I agreed tentatively. "But I want something more than that, Harry."

He jumped like a hungry trout rising for a well cast fly. "You name it, if I got it — "

"I also want Althea's mink coat." I was quite certain she did not know the depth of his financial difficulties.

Harry balked a blink's worth, no doubt wondering how to break such distressing news. Then he laughed and said, "You sly dog! Do you have a girlfriend we don't know about?"

"No, I don't." Since the divorce, my lovelife has been all wishful thinking, but it didn't hurt to admit that now. Harry's rabid desperation had inspired me. "That's why I want Althea to be wearing the mink when I come by to pick it up."

Poor Harry gaped in shock long enough for me to drain my mug of beer. As if on cue, Althea came into the room carrying two freshly uncapped bottles. For once I did not gape and slaver at the sight of her. It was more fun watching Harry.

He waited until she was puttering in the kitchen again. Then he croaked, "What are you suggesting?"

"Just a short-term loan. A weekend will do. I'll take her down to Carmel. There's a nice place there overlooking the ocean. Every room has a fireplace at the foot of the bed. I think you told me about it, Harry, but of course Lynn and I could never afford to go there . . ."

"You sonofabitch!" It was all he could do to remain in his chair. "You really want your pound of flesh!"

"I'm guessing it's closer to a hundred and ten pounds, Harry. I want your wife."

"Hey, Ed — " Harry's tone did not dismiss the idea completely, he was grasping at straws. " — there's a fiery little redhead who works for me. My secretary. She's ten years younger than Althea and stacked like you wouldn't believe. She likes older men and nice places, I know I can fix you up — "

"I don't want your secretary, I want your wife."

Harry sulked, hissing like a boiler about to explode. "Althea would never — "

"Persuade her," I said. "If I can convince the loan committee, you can surely convince her."

SOMEHOW HE DID. ALTHEA CAME TO THE BANK WITH HIM on Thursday to sign the final papers and pick up the check. She looked resplendant in her wrapping of dark ranch mink, a sight that did not escape careful appraisal by the three senior members of the loan committee I'd so cleverly deceived.

She and I exchanged furtive glances, a shy smile and a sly wink, and I could not help thinking that Althea was genuinely pleased by the prospect of cuckolding Harry for a couple of days. He bragged more to me about his frequent affairs than he did the price of her mink coat. Althea must have known, and both of us grinned guilt-free, expecting to share sweet vengeance all through the weekend ahead. Harry looked morose, even when clutching the cashier's check for \$30,000 in his right hand. It took all the restraint I could muster not to scream "GOTCHA!" at the top of my lungs.

I shot skeet as I usually do early each Saturday morning. The arrangement was, I'd pick up Althea promptly at noon. I might as well have waited at home. My whole being trembled so much in anticipation that I could not hit the side of the proverbial barn.

Harry left the house at 11:47; I know because I was counting the minutes, and his mortgaged Porsche burned rubber half a block as though to advertise his departure. Gotcha, Harry! Gotcha! GOTCHA!

No sense holding off any longer, I knew Althea would be waiting. I stopped the Volvo in front of their house, knocked and walked in anxiously without awaiting a reply.

Althea's mink coat was draped casually over the arm of the living room couch, her nightcase beside it on the floor. Far back in the house, in the bath adjoining their master bedroom, I could hear the splash of the shower. I'd come early and she wasn't quite ready yet.

On the coffee table there was an ice bucket holding a magnum of champagne, and beside it two long-stemmed glasses. Good old Harry, a class act even in the depths of his most humiliating defeat. I unwired the cork, poured myself a glass of the sparkling wine and offered up a silent toast to the weekend ahead. Gotcha, Harry. I gotcha good!

Sipping two glasses of chilled champagne increased my giddy impatience, but the shower was still running, a steady and monotonous sound. Steam began to drift into the hall at the back of the house. I called, "Althea?" and heard no response.

"Hey, Althea — " I walked back to the bedroom door and looked in through the gathering cloud. She gazed back at me with sightless eyes, her mouth agape and unmoving. Sprawled naked across the foot of the bed, she'd been shot through the chest.

A dark, ragged-edged stain spread from beneath her back. I screamed, "Althea!" and rushed to her but she could not respond. The nightstand drawer was open, and Harry's powerful new .44 magnum lay on the floor by her dangling hand.

I felt a sick wave of guilt, thinking at first that Althea had killed herself rather than face the weekend as planned. But that made no sense at all. She hated guns and never touched one that I knew. And the fatal shot had been fired through a pillow to mute its roaring noise, scorched feathers fringed the wound and littered the room all around. Would a suicide think or care how much noise the gun made?

No, it must have been Harry who couldn't face it. He left his beautiful blonde wife for me, but he left her dead. I heard sirens wailing not too far away. Their strident sound sent chills up my back. It wasn't at all like Harry to have done such a rash and stupid thing. If he'd killed Althea, he meant to get away with it. He meant to win.

My heart sank, I'd been suckered again. I could almost hear him saying *gotcha!* as the sirens whined to a stop right outside. In the silence punctuated by the slamming of car doors, his voice still echoed. Some things Harry said last weekend hadn't made sense until then.

He bought that expensive new handgun of intriguing design at a

time circumstances forced him to sell other prized weapons from his collection . . . because I'd seen all the older pieces and couldn't be counted on to examine one closely, leaving my fingerprints all over it and the six polished cartridges it contained.

His handling the gun later — with gloves on, I'm sure — would smudge my prints some, but only enough to make it look more like I'd experienced its mulish recoil. And chemical tests would confirm that I'd recently fired a gun because Harry knows that I shoot skeet every Saturday morning.

Harry's troubles were such that he had to refinance his house, but he'd also taken out life insurance on Althea so recently the policy did not yet have loan value. Why would a man in financial difficulty spend money on new insurance unless he had some plan to collect? The policy must have been a big one, Harry never did anything half way, and I would be willing to bet it contained a double indemnity clause for death due to other than natural causes. I heard a fist beating on the front door and a stern voice that said, "Police! Open up!"

I stood quaking, too stricken with shock to even think about wiping my fingerprints off the gun and the drawerpull where it had been kept. The way I'd doctored his loan application was almost evidence enough. Harry would tearfully describe the terms I demanded, I could almost see him sobbing on the witness stand, saying that Althea had agreed reluctantly, but she detested the idea. She must have changed her mind at the last moment, and he — Heavy footsteps thudded in the hall, but they hardly seemed louder than the beating of my heart.

Still I found it hard to believe that Harry would gun down his gorgeous wife for profit alone. Then I remembered the fiery little redhead that he told me about and how his eyes twinkled when he described her. *She's ten years younger than Althea and stacked like you wouldn't believe. She likes older men and nice places . . .* He must have been smirking and thinking what a damn fool plodder I was. Gotcha, Ed. Gotcha again.

I was bending down, reaching for the gun and thinking about putting its barrel in my mouth when the first cop through the door behind me yelled, "Freeze! Don't move! Don't even blink!"

I laughed weakly and could only recall the Chance card that says, GO DIRECTLY TO JAIL. DO NOT PASS GO, DO NOT COLLECT . . . And I know what he's going to do if the prison authorities will allow it. Harry will send me a Monopoly set.

It was blackmail, pure and simple. What could she do to keep her husband from finding out the awful truth about her!

Annabel

by RUTH WISSMANN

GRASPING HER LONG SKIRTS AND PLACING ONE KNEE ON THE cushioned window seat, Annabel looked outside anxiously as she waited for the carriage that would bring Kevin to her side. Because of the trees hugging the walls, and the tall hollyhocks it was almost impossible to see the road. Only snatches of it were visible, and after this cloudy day the sunset was muted and lavender which seemed to add to the chilling apprehension gripping her heart with trembling fingers.

Then returning to the fireplace, she urged a hesitant flame to life, glanced at the table set for two and poured herself a second cup of steaming tea. This honeymoon cottage had been an ideal arrangement. No one knew where they were, or so it seemed, and she told herself that she should feel calm and happy, but somehow she could not quite achieve this goal, for always there was the thought of the stranger hovering in a corner of her mind.

Who was this man? How many times had she tried to recall if she had ever met him? He knew her maiden name, and now her married one. And there had been the letter, the threatening warning that if she refused to see him, a terrible accident would take place.

Surely, thought Annabel, he had mistaken her for someone else. He had signed the letter, J. Osburn. Shaking her head and spilling a little tea, she could recall no one she knew with that name. Yes, it had been a mistake; however, this did not lessen her nervousness. She took a deep breath, reached for the kettle and after lighting a candle she opened the door to the cellar.

Descending the stairs, she thought how convenient it was to have a

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well beneath the house. Since winters were icy this far north, it would certainly be a convenience. And now at twilight she did not have to go outside. Yes, there was no doubt about her being afraid. Oh, Kevin, she thought. Hurry! Hurry back to me, and almost as if receiving her message, a horse and carriage drew up by the gate, and hearing this, she quickly filled the kettle and ran back up the stairs.

Swinging open the front door, she called to the man walking toward her, "Kevin! I'm so glad you're back." Then her smile vanished, and her lips hung open with surprise. While the man was the same size as Kevin, his face was totally unfamiliar to her.

"Mrs. Rogers?" he asked.

She shook her head, then swallowing with difficulty she said, "Oh, yes, I am." She had not been Kevin's wife long enough, she realized, to remember quickly that his name was now hers.

"I'm John Osburn."

She caught her breath and could say nothing.

"It's becoming a cold night. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"No — " she said, beginning to close the door. "You — you have the wrong house. You're a stranger. I don't know you, and — "

"But I know you, and I think we should talk — especially now before your husband returns — if he does."

"If he does?" she asked, trying to conceal her anxiety. "He'll be back at any moment and — "

"Then we should talk quickly. There's a certain matter to settle. I know you received my letter. I watched you open it as you stood by a window. I was in the street below and — "

"You have the wrong house — the wrong person. Good day, sir."

However, his boot was in the way; she could not close the door, and fear seemed to paralyze her for a moment. "I think," he said, "that we should talk about a certain woman — one named Viola."

He was inside and closing the door behind him as she asked, "What do you want of me?"

"Money," he replied, and his voice became grim as he added, "You brought about Viola's death. You and I are the only ones who know this, and it weighs heavily on my mind, for she was my cousin, almost like a — sister to me, she was."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Annabel insisted moving back into the room. "You have mistaken me for somebody else. I don't know anyone named Viola. I've never heard of her."

"Oh, but you do — or did. She was standing in the way of your

marrying Kevin."

"You're mad! I want you to leave this house immediately."

"But I don't want to go — not until the pain in my heart at losing her is eased. She was my *very* dear cousin."

"Please leave now. Soon my husband will be home and he'll —"

"He'll be interested in what I have to say, Mrs. Rogers. I'm sure of that, I am."

"Your cousin was killed by a runaway horse, so how dare you —"

"But wait — didn't you just tell me you had never heard of her? Then why do you know how she was killed?"

Annabel took a deep breath before she said, "I learned of the tragedy. It's been talked about in the village, but I didn't know her at all."

"About the runaway horse, Mrs. Rogers. It was discovered that something sharp had been inserted under the saddle. She had been talking to you from astride her horse, and then as she started to ride away —"

Now suddenly there was the sound of another horse and carriage near the gate, and quickly the stranger said, "You must reach a decision. Either I tell him what happened, or you agree to pay me well for my silence. I don't believe Kevin will be pleased to learn that his former wife's death was due to —"

"Oh, very well, but we must not be heard. Stay here, and — we — can meet somewhere. I know! Meet me in the cellar at midnight. The door leading to it is off the kitchen, and I'll have the money."

"Kevin!" Annabel said breathlessly as she hurried to greet him. "I — I'm so glad you're here. We have a guest. Someone I'm sure you know uh —"

"John!" Kevin said with surprise. "Why — how good to see you again."

The men shook hands and Annabel, with words about serving tea, vanished into the kitchen where she leaned against the wall and feared she might faint. Somehow she managed to survive the hours that followed, and when Kevin invited his former wife's cousin to spend the night, as she feared he would do, her eyes met John's for only a fleeting moment as he accepted.

ANNABEL THOUGHT OF RUNNING AWAY — OF HIDING IN THE woods. She had no access to the amount of money demanded, and furthermore, how could she be sure that he wouldn't return again and

again for more and still more? During the evening she found herself taking one and then another warming, soothing glass of brandy as she sat with the men in the inglenooks until, at last, they retired for the night.

Because fear had been dulled by wine, Annabel had to struggle to stay awake until midnight. Twice she dozed off, and the second time she awakened it was to find the moon directly overhead. With caution, so as not to wake up Kevin, she slipped from the warmth of their feather bed and quietly let herself out of the room. In her hand was a kerchief filled with slips of paper. John might not discover until it was too late, she told herself, that it was not money. Perhaps not until he was riding away in the night — maybe not until sun-up.

The fire in the grate had died, and she shivered as she crossed the room. While quietly opening the door to the cellar she wondered if he would already be waiting for her, and with this thought came fear. It took all the courage she could find to quietly descend the stairs. Then she stopped. There he is, she told herself. Now don't let him intimidate you. Stand your ground and warn him to leave here quickly and never contact you again.

He was drinking water from the pail and gave no indication whatsoever of hearing her. It was now that an idea struck her suddenly, a daring one that caused her to catch her breath while her heart seemed to stop. Then she was running on silent feet across the earthen floor. It was all so quick and so easy! She had caught him off guard. One moment he was standing there leaning over a little as though looking into the depths below, and the next second, with an odd and startled cry, he was falling — falling and then struggling in the deep, dark water below. Immediately she pulled the wooden cover over the opening to muffle his voice, and then, at last, there was silence. Breathlessly she ran back up the stairs while hoping that she could crawl into bed without waking Kevin who was, fortunately, a sound sleeper.

And then she thought, Why wait? Why not waken him now, so they could get away from here as soon as possible? She'd tell him that she was very ill — in terrible pain and wanted to go home.

At the top of the stairs she stopped and caught her breath and stared at the man saying, "I fell asleep. Sorry. Do you have the money? I'll take it and leave. Kevin need never know."

John stood frozen with terror. The sound of a car door opening nudged him into action. He raced for the fence. It was less than ten yards away, but it seemed the longest run of his life!

FLASHBACK

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

LIKE A BLIND MAN LOST IN A MINE FIELD, JOHN SHUFFLED across the family room, one gloved hand groping frantically into the surrounding darkness. His other hand was tightly clenched around the handle of a portable television set. The heavy tangles of jewelry sagging his jacket pockets made him feel old and tired. Far too old and tired to be involved in his first robbery.

Up ahead, John glimpsed the flickering beam of Curt's flashlight on the shag carpeting. He stumbled toward it.

"Hurry up," Curt barked as he slipped through the open glass doorwall. "A light just went on in the house next door."

Shifting his hold on the television set, John staggered forward. Fear squeezed his stomach in a cold, vise-like grip. His knee smashed into a table, and he cursed in a ragged gasp. Any thought of stealth was forgotten as he struggled to control his rising panic.

At last, he reached the doorwall and nearly tumbled out onto the patio. A brisk October wind whipped his hair and chilled the sweat that streamed down his face.

Across the yard, John saw Curt leap up, grab the top of the eight-foot redwood fence, and pull himself up without losing his grip on the silver chest. Curt crouched on the fence, a black silhouette against the dark gray sky. Suddenly, he shouted "Cops!" in a hoarse voice and disappeared from his perch.

John heard the silver chest clatter to the ground followed by Curt's footsteps fleeing down the alley. He stood frozen with terror, his breath caught in his throat. The sound of a car door opening in the distance nudged him into action. He dropped the television set and raced toward the fence. It was less than ten yards away, but it seemed the longest run of his life. He dove upwards and clawed at the top rail, but his wet hands were unable to secure a firm grip. Slivers of wood pierced his fingers. He tumbled backward and fell heavily onto the ground. Pain shot through his leg as he scrambled to his feet. He jumped at the fence again, and his bleeding fingers clutched the top. He dangled helplessly for a moment, then slowly pulled himself upward. His straining muscles began to tremble uncontrollably, but, with a final burst of effort, he managed to kick his leg over the fence.

John laid with his chest flat against the top rail, his legs straddling the fence. Reluctantly, he peered down into the alley. He spotted Curt's discarded chest surrounded by pieces of silverware that glimmered in the moonlight. They seemed much farther than eight feet away. He became aware of the furious pounding of his heart. Through his fear, a memory began to stir at the edges of his consciousness. Years ago, he had cringed on top of another fence. He had been four years old. His mind drifted back to that time, erasing the present. No longer was he a seventeen-year-old burglar, but a terrified child needing his father's help. . . .

JOHNNY HAD CRAWLED OUT OF BED AT DAWN. HIS MOTHER was asleep in the next room. The house was silent. Daddy worked nights and would be coming home soon. Daddy was tall and strong, and Johnny loved him more than anyone. But he wished that Daddy would play with him more. Maybe if he were waiting for him outside when he got home from work, Daddy would know how much he loved him. Maybe Daddy would pay more attention to him then.

Flushed with excitement, Johnny dressed himself. He pulled on pants and a shirt but forgot about his underwear. He tugged on his shoes without bothering about socks. Then he quietly tiptoed through

the house and let himself out the side door. It was cool outside, but that didn't make any difference. Soon Daddy would be home to embrace him in a warm bearhug and carry him back inside.

He waited several minutes in the driveway, but Daddy's big red car didn't come. Johnny grew restless. He wandered into the backyard and spotted the new wooden fence Daddy had put up the week before. It seemed very high, and it was made of crisscrossed planks of wood. You could climb it almost like a ladder. Wouldn't Daddy be proud of him if he were able to get all the way to the top?

Johnny walked over to the fence, grabbed onto one of the slats and found a toehold. Carefully, he began to make his way up the fence. It wasn't too hard if you went only a little bit at a time.

In a short while, he reached the top, hooked one leg over the uppermost rail, and looked down. The grass seemed a mile away. Had he really climbed this high? His stomach flip-flopped inside of him. He clutched the rail and pressed himself against it as hard as he could. He was too scared to try to climb back down. He had to go to the bathroom real bad. He started to cry.

Where was Daddy?

He would be there any minute, any second, to help him down. In the meantime, Johnny would hang on real tight. And he wouldn't cry anymore. Daddy got mad when he cried. Daddy would see how brave he was.

Johnny waited on the fence for a long time. When he felt he couldn't hang on another second, he heard a car door slam.

"Daddy," he hollered. "Daddy."

His father came into the backyard. He was still dressed in his blue work uniform.

"Help me, Daddy."

"What the hell are you doing up there?" Daddy's voice was harsh and cold. Not proud. Not loving.

"I came outside to wait for you, Daddy. I climbed the fence."

"Where's your mother?"

"Sleeping. I love you, Daddy. Help me down."

His father stared at him. He needed a shave. Sometimes, when he was in a playful mood, he would grab Johnny and rub the coarse bristles against his face. It hurt, but Johnny always laughed. Now, he made no effort to help Johnny. He said, "You got up there by yourself, you can get down the same way. Be a big boy, and climb down."

"I'm not a big boy, Daddy."

"Yes, you are. Be big and brave. Be like Daddy."

"I'm scared." Johnny started to cry again. He didn't want to, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Don't be a crybaby sissy. I'll catch you if you fall."

Johnny squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "I'm real, real scared, Daddy."

"Just come down the same way you went up."

Johnny lifted one leg and balanced it on the top rail.

"Don't look down," Daddy said.

Johnny's fingers pressed against the wood, and he lowered his legs over the side. He slid his feet over the fence until he found a ledge. He was now upright, his arms and head on one side of the fence, his legs on the other. He was facing away from his father.

"Are you still there, Daddy?"

"I'm here."

Johnny looked at his hands. They were as white as snow with splotches of blood on them. He cried louder.

"Hurry up, or I'm going inside. I don't have all day to wait for you."

Johnny started down the fence, pushing himself against the wood like a fly on flypaper. Halfway down, his foot slipped, and he fell. He banged his head against the fence before he landed on the ground. Daddy didn't catch him.

"You're all right," said his father. "Stop crying. Now maybe you've learned not to try a stunt like that again."

Johnny stood up. His hands hurt, his head ached, and he had wet his pants. He sobbed.

"I don't want anything to do with a crybaby," said his father. He turned and walked toward the house.

A minute later, Johnny followed him. He had stopped crying. . . .

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER, CLINGING TO ANOTHER FENCE, John remembered the incident clearly; though he had not thought of it since it had first occurred. He began to weep as he had then, but his tears were not caused by fear. He wondered where the memory had been hidden in his mind all this time. He wondered if his father ever thought of that morning.

He forced the recollection out of his mind. If I take off fast, I can still get away, he told himself. But his body refused to move.

"Come on down from there," a man's voice commanded.

John jerked his head toward the voice. In the dark alley, he saw an

indistinct form several feet away. He knew it was a policeman.

"I can't move," he mumbled.

"You got up there, you can get down. Now move!" The policeman spoke in a cold, harsh voice.

John responded to the voice. He shifted his weight to one side, grabbed onto the top rail, and pushed himself off the fence. When his feet hit the ground, he began racing down the alley.

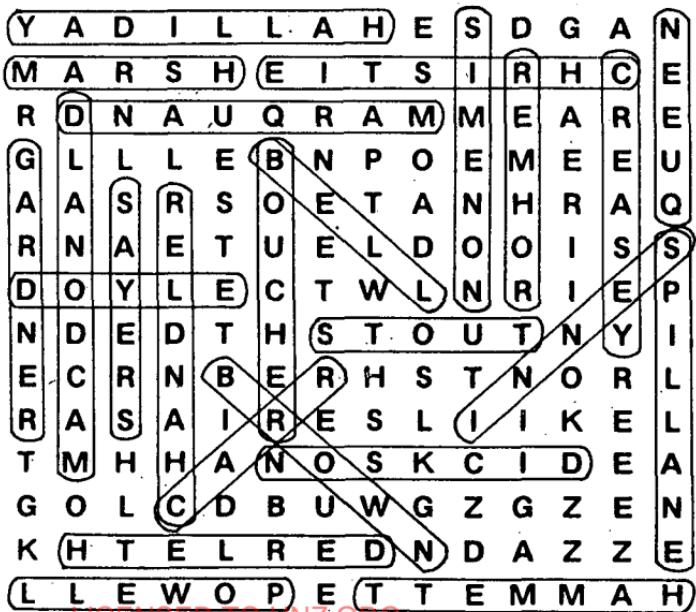
"Halt," the policeman shouted.

John kept going. He heard a gun shot and willed his legs to move faster. Instead, he found himself on his knees, coughing up warm liquid. Pain burned into his back like a searing poker. He collapsed forward.

The policeman was beside him, kneeling down. "I told you to halt," he said. There was concern in his voice. It sounded strange to John. "I didn't want to shoot, kid. You didn't give me any choice." He placed his hand on John's shoulder and gently rolled him over.

As he looked up into his father's face, John wasn't sure where he was or how old he was. But the gravel against his cheek reminded him of Daddy's whiskers.

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE ON PAGE 81



If there was any justice in the world, this was one murderer who would get it!

Harry Had It Coming!

by HELENE O'SHEA

I COULD TELL MY LAWYER WAS WORRIED. WELL, ANYBODY would be, defending in a murder trial which had had so much publicity.

See, Harry had been a big shot and known a lot of people. Nothing opens as many doors to social and business contacts as lots of money, and Lord knows Harry had it. I still can't say for sure exactly what Harry did, but it involved the forming and dissolving of consortiums to buy and sell property, and when the partners shook hands goodbye, they all had a lot of profit in their pockets. Nothing shady about it, Harry insisted, just a matter of being knowledgeable ahead of the general public.

Yes, there was always money to spend, but Harry wanted a hand in how it was spent. He wanted to choose the dresses and jewelry I bought, and to tell the truth, Harry's taste wasn't as good as he liked to think it was. But who's going to tell a guy with a fat checkbook that the bracelet or suit he had chosen was just a little too flashy to be considered good taste?

And Harry was a gladhander at a party, a born politician who would never have run for office, because he had too much power working from the position he already held. But no matter how jovial he appeared among crowds of people, at home he wasn't too easy to get along with.

Take for instance the little dinners he liked me to throw. No matter how hard I tried, there was always some little thing he lit on, to criticize — the hollandaise sauce seemed too runny, the crust on the beef wellington wasn't flaky enough. And the house . . . if there was one glass on the kitchen counter, I was supposed to wash it and put it away before I went up to bed. Little things, all of them, but they wore on you.

It was the matter of my hairdo though, that really ticked me off, and became the final straw. When I had explained it to my attorney, he just looked puzzled, and asked: "That's why you shot your husband?" And when I agreed that it was, he got that strained expression on his face, and I hadn't seen him since without it.

SO HERE WE WERE ON THE MORNING OF THE TRIAL, AND HE was whispering to me that he hadn't been able to round up any witnesses to testify that Harry had treated me badly, but I wasn't worried. I knew that when I explained to the judge, I wouldn't have any trouble being understood.

The judge was pretty impressive in the black robes. The jury filed in and looked at me quizzically, and there were a dozen reporters too, among the crowd of spectators. As I say, Harry was a pretty well known guy.

I was the only witness in my own defense, and I must say I handled myself well. I went all through the bits about the dinners, and remembered to tell how Harry used to run his fingers over even the highest shelves in the den to see how well they were dusted.

"That's why you killed your husband?" The judge sounded as puzzled as my lawyer had that first day.

But . . . "No, it wasn't, Your Honor." I groped in my bag for the studio portrait which had been taken of me two weeks before Harry died. "That's how I used to wear my hair, Your Honor. It isn't easy to train a hairdresser to do that figure eight chignon so smoothly, when my hair was so long, but you can see it suited me exactly." I waited for the judge to nod agreement. "But then Harry decided I needed a more up-to-date look, so he made an appointment with a new hairdresser

for me, and went along to supervise. I wasn't allowed to look until we got home."

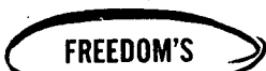
At that point, I pulled off my hat — one Harry had chosen for me, a spotted, fake-fur toque — and just as I knew it would, my newly frizzed hairdo bounded up, looking like it had a life — a none too reputable life — of its own.

"When I got home and looked in the mirror, I went right to where I keep my gun and got it, and shot him!"

There was absolute silence in the courtroom until the judge spoke to the jury, directing them to bring in a verdict for acquittal. Then pandemonium burst forth, as reporters rushed through the doors, the spectators started muttering, and some of Harry's friends made known their opinion.

I could scarcely hear the words when the judge bent down and asked if I could introduce her to my old hairdresser. She said she admired nothing as much as a smooth chignon.

I always knew justice would be better served when they named more women to the bench.



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BOOK REVIEWS

by JOHN BALL

In his new work, *Blue Flame* Joseph Gilmore exploits an old gambit to its ultimate limit: the man who is telling the truth but who cannot get anyone to believe him. A veteran British intelligence agent who has never been regarded as very capable stumbles onto something big: a terrorist plan to blow up a liquid gas super tanker in Boston harbor. When even his own service repudiates him, he goes into action on his own. He is no James Bond, but he does his best. There is a lot of action at the right times in this one. The ending is foreseeable, an unavoidable facet of the plot, but Mr. Gilmore's writing will hold your interest all the way. (Dodd Mead, price not given)

★ ★ ★

The first seventy pages of *Blood Oath* by David Morrell start out like a real winner with an interesting idea and some engaging developments. Then, however, the story begins to slide downhill to what eventually becomes a ridiculous and preposterous ending. Mr. Morrell is a talented writer who can do much better than this. (St. Martin's Marek, \$11.95)

★ ★ ★

Joseph Hansen writes very well, with a particular gift for dialogue, but he is ruining himself with his apparent obsession with homosexuality. In his latest work, *Backtrack*, Mr. Hansen introduces a series of males who are all either homosexual or who permit their bodies to be used for sodomy and other purposes. When a small time actor is killed, his son sets out to find what really happened. As he

explores Hollywood, he eventually makes himself a new target for the killer. Good solid material here, but the explicit abnormal sex will turn off many readers. (Foul Play Press, Woodstock, Vermont, \$12.95)

★ ★ ★

Reginald Hill, a well established professional, is the author of *A Very Good Hater*, which has now appeared in this country. Two very different men are attending a regimental reunion in England when they spot a person who could be a much wanted Nazi war criminal. They set out in their individual ways to find out if their suspicions are true. As they become mired deeper and deeper in what they are doing, some innocent people begin to get hurt. This is a book of character rather than action, but it comes off very well and the ultimate ending is not what the reader expects. The plot twists and turns, holding interest all the way. (Foul Play Press, \$12.95)

★ ★ ★

Perhaps the last anthology by a true giant of the literature, Ellery Queen, is *Eye Witness*. As usual, Mr. Queen gives us some very fine reading out of the top drawer. This praise must be withheld from our own modest contribution, but we are delighted by Nan Hamilton, whose Lt. Ohara stories just won her an Edgar nomination. In private life Miss Hamilton is married: we can hear her typewriter going in the other room now. (The Dial Press, \$12.95)

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: Two of Michael Innes' fine stories are now available: Penguin offers *The Open House*, while the Harper and Row Perennial series has added *The Man from the Sea*. They are each \$2.95 . . . Edmund Crispin left us only a few mysteries, but they are all classics. Penguin now offers his memorable *Frequent Hearses* at \$2.95 . . . If you don't know Martin Ames, try his *Other People* from Penguin, \$3.95 . . . The upcoming Olympic Games in Los Angeles has inspired William Oscar Johnson's *Hammered Gold*. Top Olympic contenders are meeting with fatal mishaps, all of which appear accidental — at first. A good thriller from Pocket Books, \$3.50 . . . Another hair-raiser is Martin Caidin's *Deathmate*, which mixes politics, mind control, and some aftermaths of the Vietnam war. Bantam, \$2.95 . . . The widely-known *Death of a Doll* by Hilda Lawrence is back in print from Penguin, \$3.95 . . . So is Lionel Black's *Death has Green Fingers* at \$3.50 . . . Everett F. Bleiler's excellent anthology *A Treasury of Victorian Ghost Stories* is now available in soft cover from Scribners. At \$7.95 this is a bargain offering.

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